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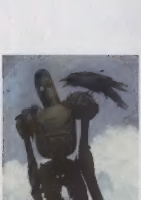
COVER: *Diabulus* by Victoria Francis. RIGHT: Tim Burton visits a theater near you with *The Corpse Bride*. See story on page 8. BELOW: *Crowbot*, by Jon Foster. See story on page 68.



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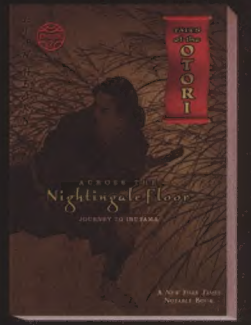

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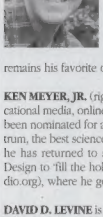
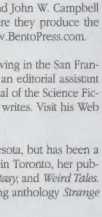
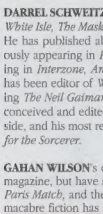


GRAHAM EDWARDS (left) was born near Glastonbury Tor and now lives in Nottingham (not such a big leap from King Arthur to Robin Hood). His wife sings and his two children beg him not to leave the bedtime story on a cliffhanger; occasionally he obliges. He spent his youth on the UK's south coast. When he wasn't in the cinema he was on the seafront with an 8mm movie camera in his hand and a Force 8 gale throwing waves over his head. Over the years he's worked as a graphic designer, illustrator and animator. He's directed multimedia shows for theme parks and painted snowflakes in Santa's Grotto. But writing remains his favorite occupation of all.



KEN MEYER, JR. (right) has been working in comics, games, educational media, online games and more for the last 15 years. He has been nominated for an Eisner and appeared in 5 volumes of Spectrum, the best science fiction and fantasy art of the year. Currently, he has returned to school at the Savannah College of Art and Design to 'fill the holes' and get on the radio again (www.scadradio.org), where he goes by the name "Dr. Depresso."

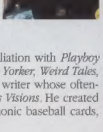
DAVID D. LEVINE is a graduate of Clarion West, a winner of the Writers of the Future Contest and James White Award, and a nominee for the Hugo Award and John W. Campbell Award. He lives in Portland, Oregon with his wife Kate Yule, where they produce the respected fanzine *Bento*. His Web site is www.BentoPress.com.



TIM PRATT (left) is a displaced Southerner living in the San Francisco Bay Area. During the day he works as an editorial assistant at *Locus*; by night he edits *Star Line*, the journal of the Science Fiction Poetry Association—and in between, he writes. Visit his Web site at *www.sff.net/people/timpratt*

KATE RIEDEL was born and raised in Minnesota, but has been a card-carrying Canadian for years. Now living in Toronto, her publication credits include pieces in *Not One of Us*, *On Spec*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Weird Tales*. Her novelette *Song Cycle* has recently been accepted for the upcoming anthology *Strange Pleasures #4*, from Prime Books.

A versatile illustrator and designer, **JOE KOVACK**'s work has appeared on books, magazines, toys and advertisements for close to twenty years. He is an instructor at The Columbus College of Art and Design, and takes as much pride in the success of former students as he does in his own accomplishments. A big Sci-Fi and Fantasy fan, Joe is always eager to bring the fantastic to life on the pages of books and magazines such as this. Joe lives with his wife Julia and two children, Paige and Evan, in central Ohio.



DARREL SCHWEITZER's (right) books include three novels, *The White Isle*, *The Mask of the Sorcerer*, and *The Shattered Goddess*. He has published about 250 short stories, including two previously appearing in *Realms of Fantasy*, as well as others appearing in *Interzone*, *Amazing Whispers*, and *The Horror Show*. He has been editor of *Weird Tales* since 1987, and is presently editing *The Neil Gaiman Reader* for Wildside Press. In addition, he conceived and edited the hoax magazine *Weird Trails* for Wildside, and his most recently published book is *Sekenre: The Book for the Sorcerer*.

GAHAN WILSON's cartoons are known chiefly because of his affiliation with *Playboy* magazine, but have shown up in periodicals as diverse as *The New Yorker*, *Weird Tales*, *Paris Match*, and the cover of *Newsweek*. Gahan is also a talented writer whose oftenmacabre fiction has appeared in *Omni* and the original *Dangerous Visions*. He created a CD-ROM entitled *Gahan Wilson's Ultimate Haunted House*, demonic baseball cards, and a telefilm for Showtime. He makes his home on Long Island.

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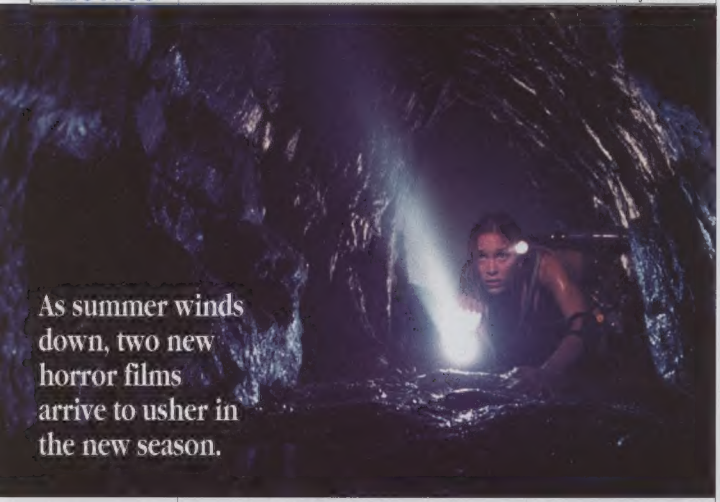
By Resa Nelson



As summer winds down, two new horror films arrive to usher in the new season.

TOP: Pelper Perabo stars as Charli in The Cave.

BOTTOM: Helena Bonham Carter voices the Corpse Bride.

The horror season kicks off early this season with two unusual films due in theaters months before Halloween.

The Cave, Screen Gems' new action/horror movie (scheduled for release on August 26) is about experts who explore a newly discovered system of caves in Romania.

Wait—bats live in caves. Transylvania is in Romania. Is this a vampire movie?

Freshman director Bruce Hunt laughs at the question. "If you talk to any Romanian film crew, they just roll their eyes. It's not a vampire story. It was more the idea of the mystique of an Eastern Bloc country."

Hunt describes *The Cave* as a unique mix of genres. On one hand, the film depicts the realities of cave diving. The goal is to show both the beauty and the danger of this extreme sport. The screenwriters, Michael Steinberg and Tegan West, were inspired by a *National Geographic* magazine article about a cave-diving expedition gone wrong. Hunt recruited that article's photographer, Wes Skiles, as his underwater cinematographer. Skiles led a team of divers into Yucatan cenotes (natural limestone wells) and caves to film footage for the movie.

The Cave is a horror film with a new kind of monster, along the lines of *Alien,* which has been described as a haunted house movie set on a spaceship. But where *Alien* took place in outer space, *The Cave* takes place in inner space.

"We loved the idea that you're in a haunted house and something else is in there with you," Hunt says. "But our haunted house tends to be a little bit more exciting. It has ice crevasses, rapids, and waterfalls. You have to fight those physical obstacles as much as what is out there attacking you. And there's nowhere safe. You're wondering whether you're going deeper into the system or being led out of it. It's a lot of fun."

The story begins when a team of scientists journeys deep in the Romanian forest and discover the ruins of a 1400s church built on top of the entrance to an enormous underground cave system. When local biologists suspect the

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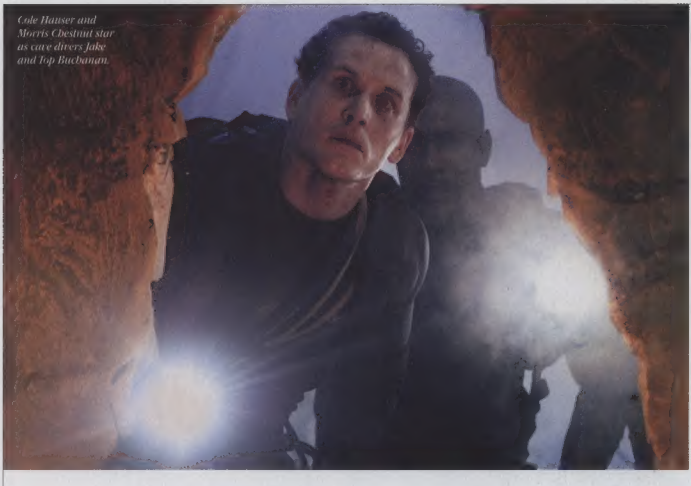

Cole Hauser and Morris Chestnut star as cave divers Jake and Top Buchanan.

cave may support a new eco-system, they call in a team of American cave explorers. This part of the story is also based on fact, although what follows is pure fiction.

Brothers Jack (Cole Hauser) and Tyler (Eddie Cibrian) lead a team of cave divers whose interests range from documentary filmmaking to marine biology. Once inside the cave system, an accident happens and the team finds itself trapped. They realize they must go through the cave in order to escape it. The problem is, they've not only encountered a new eco-system, but they're about to encounter a new and very dangerous species.

"The group has to trust that Jack is leading them out of the system," Hunt says. "Doubts about his leadership split the group, and we finally meet what's down there in the dark in quite a gruesome way."

Once again, Hunt points out how art imitates life. "In the mid-1990's a cave system in Romania was discovered by accident. They found this cave had no outside influences on it. It had no sunlight, no heat. The water was uncontaminated. Chernobyl had contaminated the water table for miles in the Eastern Bloc, but there was no sign of radiation in this water system.

"The interesting thing about caves is, life has to survive without sunlight. Eyesight is not required. Anything that lives in a cave usually has adapted from something that has fallen or has become trapped down there. The idea is that you need to adapt to that system—your sense of where you are comes from sound, like bats. Antennas grow. You lose pigmentation and eyesight. This became part of the scientific basis for what our writers are up to."

Hunt came to direct *The Cave* thanks to having met director Alex Proyas when Hunt

Lena Headey (The Brothers Grimm) stars as Sandrine.

was working on second unit visual effects for *Dark City*. Proyas then invited Hunt to work on *The Matrix*. Later, having already optioned *The Cave* script, Proyas offered it to Hunt, knowing his goal was to direct.

"I thought it was a great project, because I really liked the scope of it," Hunt says. "There had never been anything done before like this world of cave diving put in a dramatic film. We're not talking science fiction—these are adventurers like mountaineers. They're guys that like to put their names on places that people have never seen before. It's a contemporary world, but it's almost like fantasy. The environments are so alien. You've got some fantastically dramatic things. Not being a diver myself, I've learned a lot about cave diving—some of the things you can find down there are just incredible."

Born in the United States and raised in Australia, Hunt recruited fellow Aussies and New Zealanders as his crew. In addition to *Dark City* and *The Matrix*, many of them had also worked on *Pitch Black* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. They used some of the same filmmaking techniques from those movies for *The Cave*.

"There have been people planning to make a lot of films about caves who balked at the technicalities," Hunt says, "because usually it involves large quantities of water, and water's difficult to deal with. We had dripping sets at all times. We had water, fire, and huge tanks to build. We had a dramatic 60-foot cliff. We had a lot of physical challenges and technical challenges to make this film come to life.

"So I think we're the first to ever try it. It has been possible, but I think people have been scared of it."

Hunt took on the challenge of filming about a third of the film in real caves, a death-defying act in itself. He points out that, in real life, one out of every 14 cave divers who goes into a cave never comes out.

Like his Romanian colleagues, Hunt brushes off the notion of vampires. While

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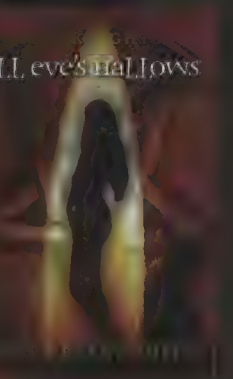

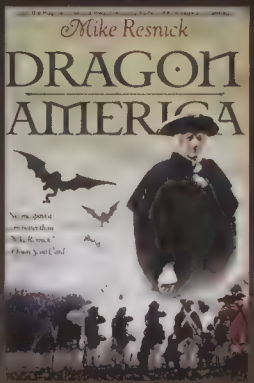

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Victor (voiced by Johnny Depp) serenades his undead bride

filming on location in Romania he was surprised when an uninvited vampire bat flew around the set Mentioning the bat off-hand says, Hunt doesn't sound afraid. After all, he knows there's something far more terrifying in *The Cave*

Taking a somewhat lighter approach to the horror genre Tim Burton (*Big Fish, Sleepy Hollow*) returns to the medium of stop-motion animation to tell the tale of *The Corpse Bride* scheduled for release on September 23 from Warner Brothers

Burton's first widely released stop-motion animation feature was *The Nightmare Before Christmas* He was shopping for ideas for another stop motion feature when he received a snippet of a folk tale from a friend at Pixar

It was a seed of an idea which I started doing different drawings on," Burton says "In that way, it was like *Nightmare* to where I did a bunch of drawings initially and worked on the idea of the story—it was just a couple of sentences

The folk tale, called *The Corpse Bride* begins with a young man in a Russian village who's engaged to be married With a friend in tow, he sets out on a two-day walk to his fiancé's village When the friends camp overnight, they spot a stick rising from the ground like a bony finger. To amuse himself and his friend, the bridegroom puts the wedding ring meant for his bride on the stick dances around it, sings the Jewish wedding song, and recites his wedding vows

What they don't realize is, that the stick isn't a stick It's a skeleton finger poking out of a grave

The grave splits open, and a corpse emerges—a former bride still wearing her wedding gown. She's little more than a skeleton covered in spiderwebs and worms She claims that because the young man has gone through the motions, they're legally married The bride's room is chilled to hear the corpse say she's looking forward to their honeymoon night and a lifetime together

The bridegroom races to his fiancé's village and asks the advice of the local rabbis While the rabbis debate, the bride learns the truth when the corpse bride shows up Ultimately the rabbis agree that while the marriage was technically legal, the dead have no claim upon the living, so the young man is free to marry his human bride

The corpse bride collapses in a heap of bones, devastated that she's lost her last chance at having a life The human bride feels compassion for her, taking care to give the corpse bride a proper burial and promising to keep her memory alive

The folk tale is based on actual events in 19th century Russia Eastern Europe was a hotbed of anti-Semitism, and Jewish wedding parties en route to the ceremony were often attacked. To prevent future generations from being born the anti-Semites would drag the bride out of the carriage in which she rode and murder her Such brides would be buried in their wedding dresses

As the director of movies like *Edward Scissorhands*, Burton is a natural to transform a folk tale with such dark roots into a movie

"In some ways, it's a

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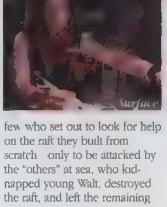
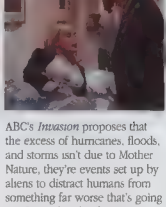
Victor (voiced by Paul Whitehouse)

FALL TELEVISION PREVIEW





Within the past year or two, fantasy TV has performed a swan dive Mainstays such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* bit the dust Good shows like *Joan of Arcadia* leaned more toward mainstream than traditional fantasy. For a while, it looked like the networks were too afraid to offer up anything other than reality TV and the traditional fare of cop and hospital shows

In other words, they played it safe

Then a funny thing happened. Last year's breakout hit was *Desperate Housewives*, a soapy comedy narrated by a ghost Peeling back the layers of housewives who look happy on the outside but who are hiding a variety of secrets tapped into the American psyche, so much so that "desperate housewives" has become a catch phrase that has served as the focal point for episodes of *Oprah* and *Dr Phil* It may have its roots in soaps ranging from *Peyton Place* to *Melrose Place*, but *Desperate Houseu wes* has hit a nerve

Even better was the success of *Lost*, which ABC originally positioned as a cross between a drama and *Survivor*, failing to mention its supernatural elements for fear of failure The season ended with the survivors split into two groups: those who stayed on the island, and the few who set out to look for help on the raft they built from scratch only to be attacked by the "others" at sea, who kidnapped young Walt, destroyed the raft, and left the remaining survivors to drown in the ocean

The two series took audiences by storm, giving ABC a revitalizing one-two punch that it desperately needed Thanks to ABC's audacity, ghosts, invisible monsters, and indescribable phenomena suddenly became chic

By mid-season, NBC added its own new series to the mix *Medium*, based on the experiences of a real-life psychic who helps police detectives solve cases Blending comedy, the challenges of balancing family life with work, and good old-fashioned ghost stories, *Medium* hopped onboard the popularity bus Its formula is addictive each episode begins with a dream the psychic is having, which eventually makes sense as the police investigation plays out. Like *Desperate Housewives* and *Lost*, *Medium's* solid cast helps to make the series a winner

Last year, two networks took a risk on three unique and unusual series. Although this fall's lineup is once again rich in horror and fantasy, there's no real evidence yet of the kind of risk-taking that produced three fantasy hits last season This time around, the networks may be playing it safe again

Here s the lowdown on the lineup of new horror and supernatural series, as well as the return of favorites

Odds are, Steven Spielberg's *The War of the Worlds* may explain why most of this season's new shows are sci fi horror tales of terrorist—oops, sorry—I mean, alien infiltration ABC's *Invasion* proposes that the excess of hurricanes, floods, and storms isn't due to Mother Nature, they're events set up by aliens to distract humans from something far worse that's going on Set in the Florida Everglades, *Invasion* is about a park ranger and his family who find themselves in the midst of discovering an alien conspiracy to dominate the human race

CBS offers *Threshold*, starring Carla Gugino, Charles S Dutton, and Brent Spiner as members of a team investigating the discovery of an extraterrestrial aircraft that has landed in the middle of the ocean. Their job is to make first contact, find out why the alien ship has landed, what has happened to its crew—oh yeah, and figure out if aliens are planning to dominate the human race

NBC joins the party with *Surface*, a series about the sudden discovery of a new form of animal that lives in the sea. Sightings of the new life form happen all over the world in the South Antarctic Sea, off San Diego, at the Oceanographic Institute in Monterey, California, and in the Gulf of Mexico How could a new form of life suddenly appear? What are the creatures? Could they be aliens planning to dominate the human race?

The WB offers a new, dark series called *Supernatural*, helmed by *X-Files*' director David Nutter The story revolves around two brothers who drive cross-country in search of the supernatural forces that killed their mother 20 years ago. They've taken over this quest from their father, who has mysteriously gone missing

CBS has canceled *Joan of Arcadia* and replaced it with a new series called *Ghost Whis perer*, preferring to mimic another network's successful series instead of supporting their own award winning, unique show Jennifer Love Hewitt stars as a psychic who's newly married and hoping to live a normal life. The problem is, ghosts have been talking to her for years, and they won't shut up She listens and winds up pursuing some unusual psychic investigations.

Finally, ABC reinvents the classic '70s show *The Night Stalker* with Stuart Townsend starring as Carl Kolchak, a crime reporter whose wife died a strange death not so long ago and he's still the main suspect, courtesy of the FBI Kolchak's determined to solve a string of crimes that have one common element: the supernatural

The WB renews audience favorites *Smallville* and *Charmed*

Showtime's *Huff*, which premiered last November, promises a second season

Several cable stations have successfully run series during the summer, when the major networks air reruns and B-level reality shows The following series began their new seasons this past June. USA's *The Dead Zone* is currently in its fourth season HBO decided that two seasons of *Carnivale* were enough—it has been canceled However, the fifth and final season of *Six Feet Under* is underway. Lifetime's *Missing* has begun its third season

The SCI FI Channel premiered *Ghost Hunters* last fall, and their second season began at the end of July and is scheduled to run into fall

And, of course, look for last year's runaway hits to return *Medium* on NBC and *Desperate Housewives* and *Lost* on ABC ❧

Continued from page 12

strange kind of romantic comedy," Burton says. "It's a triangle between a groom and two brides—and the complications that arise from that, especially because one of them is dead and one is alive.

It's not necessarily set specifically in England, even though there is a certain Victorian aspect to it and of course most of the cast is British—we try not to overemphasize that. We try to keep it as a generic fairy tale."

Some cast members of Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* also star as the voices in *The Corpse Bride*. Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter, and Christopher Lee. And they knew up front that the paycheck would be small.

"I was extremely lucky," Burton says. "It's not a hugely budgeted movie, so I was lucky to get people who are doing it almost for the love of it, which I was very, very grateful for, because it's quite an amazing cast. They're great people. It's inspiring to me when people do something for the love of it as opposed to any other reason."

When making live-action films, Burton has a reputation for going to extremes to avoid using CG effects. Maybe his avoidance of computer-dependency explains the soft spot in his heart for stop-motion animation, which consists of using stringless puppets for actors and shooting one frame at a time. In between frames, the filmmakers change the position or expression of each puppet by hand.

Computers have somewhat taken over, which has its place, but there are still those of us that love the stop-motion medium," Burton says. "The reason why computers have taken over is because Pixar makes good movies. It's not necessarily about the medium, although with stop-motion there is something subconscious and visceral about people moving an inanimate object. Bringing life to inanimate objects — there's something special about that.

I think it has to do with going back to the feelings of growing up with Harryhausen. It's taking something that's unreal, and the stop-motion aspect of it gives it a kind of reality that seems like a good chemistry. I wouldn't make just anything stop-motion.

While filming both *Charlie* and *Corpse Bride* in England, Burton jumped at the chance to meet his childhood hero, Ray Harryhausen (Jason and the Argonauts). "Both Johnny and I went over to visit him, and it's an amazing thrill, obviously. I hadn't really met him before. We went over to his house and saw all his stuff and spent the evening with him. It's great to meet people who have inspired you, and then you realize why they inspire you. He has so much to offer."

One of the highlights for Burton was inviting Harryhausen to *The Corpse Bride* set. "You're out there in East London, which is almost like a prison colony. It was definitely a great boost for everybody, because he's pretty much everyone's inspiration."

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By Terri Windling

Tricksters, Messengers, and Witch's Familiars.

A MEDIEVAL CHURCH STANDS AT THE CENTER of the small English village where I live, and in that church is strange little carving that has come to be known as the symbol of the town: three hares in a circle, their interlinked ears forming a perfect triangle. Known locally as the Tinner Rabbits, the Three Hares symbol (as it's properly called) can also be found in sixteen other churches here in Devon—often in close proximity to the equally mysterious Green Man symbol. It is widely believed that the Three Hares design is based on an old alchemical symbol for tin, representing the historic importance of tin mining in this region of the country. Recently, however, a group of local artists and historians created the Three Hares Project to investigate the history of the design. To their surprise, they discovered that the symbol's famous tin association is actually a dubious one, deriving from a misunderstanding of an alchemical illustration published in the early 17th century. In fact, the symbol is much older and farther ranging than early folklorists suspected. It is, the Three Hares Project reports, "an extraordinary and ancient archetype, stretching across diverse religions and cultures, many centuries and many thousands of miles. It is part of the shared medieval heritage of Europe and Asia (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism) yet still inspires creative work among contemporary artists."

The earliest known examples of the design can be found in Buddhist cave temples in China (581-618 CE), from there it spread all along the Silk Road, through the Middle East, through Hungary and Poland to Germany, Switzerland, and the British Isles. Though now associated with the Trinity in Christian iconography, the original, pre-Christian meaning of the design has yet to be discovered. We can glimpse

As evidenced by Terri Windling's contemporary painting, Tea Time, *the rabbit and hare still inspire*

possible interpretations, however, by looking at the wealth of world-wide myths involving rabbits and hares—archetypal symbols of femininity, the lunar cycle, fertility, and rebirth. In the world of myth, rabbits and hares are contradictory and paradoxical creatures: symbols of both courage and cowardice, of virginal purity and rampant sexuality. They are the messengers of the Great Goddess, moving by moonlight between the human world and the realm of the gods.

The Hare in the Moon

The association of rabbits, hares, and the moon can be found in numerous cultures the world over — ranging from Japan to Mexico, from Indonesia to the British Isles. While in America we speak of the Man in the Moon, the Rabbit or Hare in the Moon is a more familiar symbol in many other lands. In

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China, the Hare in the Moon carries a mortar and pestle in which he mixes the elixir of immortality; he is the messenger of the moon deity and the guardian of wild animals. Female hares were once believed to conceive through the touch of the full moon's light (without the need of impregnation by the male), or by crossing water by moonlight, or licking moonlight from a male hare's fur. Figures of hares or white rabbits are commonly found at Chinese Moon Festivals, where they represent longevity, fertility, and the feminine power of *yin*. In an old Chinese legend, the Lord Buddha summoned the animals to him before he left the earth, but only twelve of them came to bid farewell at his departure. He rewarded these twelve by naming a year after each one in the order of arrival, the cycle repeating itself through time. The animal ruling the year in which you're born is the animal "hiding in your heart," casting a strong influence on your personality, spirit, and fate. Rabbit was the fourth animal to arrive (after Rat, Ox, and Tiger), and rules over the calendar one year in every twelve. People born into the Year of the Rabbit are said to be intelligent, intuitive, kind, gracious, loyal, sensitive to beauty, diplomatic, peace-loving, and prone to moodiness.

In another Buddhist legend, from India, Hare (Lord Buddha in an early incarnation) was traveling in the company of Ape and Fox. The god Indra, disguised as a hungry beggar, decided to test their hospitality. Each animal went in search of food, and only Hare returned empty handed. Determined to be hospitable, Hare built a fire and jumped into it, feeding Indra with his own flesh. The god rewarded this sacrifice by turning him into the Hare in the Moon.

In Egyptian myth, hares were also closely associated with the cycles of the moon, which was masculine when waxing and feminine when waning; hares were likewise believed to shift back and forth from gender to gender. A hare-headed god and goddess can be found on the ancient temple walls of Dendera. The female is believed to be Wenet or Unut, a minor Egyptian deity, while the male might be a representation of Osiris (also called Wepuat or Un-nefer), who was sacrificed to the Nile annually in the form of a hare.

Hares, Rabbits, and the Goddess

In Greco-Roman myth, the hare represented love, lust, abundance, creativity, and fertility. Pliny the Elder recommended the meat of the hare as a cure for sterility, and wrote that it would enhance sexual attraction for a period of nine days. Hares were associated with the Artemis, goddess of wild places and the hunt. Newborn hares were never killed but left to her protection. The rabbit was sacred to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty, and marriage—for rabbits had "the gift of Aphrodite" (fertility) in great abundance. In Greece, the gift of a rabbit was a love token from a man to his male or female lover. In Rome, the gift of a rabbit was intended to help a barren wife conceive. Carvings of rabbits eating grapes and figs appeared on both Greek and Roman tombs, symbolizing the sacred cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

The March Hare makes an appearance in this classic illustration from Alice in Wonderland *by Arthur Rackham.*

In Teutonic myth, the earth and sky goddess Holda, leader of the Wild Hunt, was often followed by a procession of beautiful white hares, all carrying torches and Freyja, the headstrong goddess of love, sensuality, beauty, and fecundity, was also served by hare attendants, and carried a hare with her in her marvelous chariot drawn by cats.

Kaltes, the shape-shifting moon goddess of western Siberia, often roamed the hills in the form of a hare, and wore a headdress shaped liked hare's ears. Ostara in Anglo-Saxon myth was the goddess of the moon and the coming of spring; she was often depicted with a hare's head or ears, with a white hare standing in attendance. This magical hare laid brightly colored eggs which were given out to children during the spring fertility festival—an ancient tradition that survives in the form of the Easter Bunny today.

Eostre was the Celtic version of Ostara, a goddess also associated with the moon, the spring, and the seasonal cycles of death, redemption, and resurrection. She took the shape of a hare at each full moon, and all hares were sacred to her. Cesaer recorded that rabbits and hares were taboo foods to the Celtic tribes, to whom the animals were messengers of the White Goddess and under her protection. In Ireland, it was said that eating a hare was like eating one's own grandmother. Hares could also be faery maidens in disguise, and harming them would bring misfortune. The Celts used rabbits for divination by studying the patterns of their tracks, their mating dances, and their entrails. It was believed that rabbits burrowed underground in order to better commune with the spirit world.

As Christianity took hold in the west, hares and rabbits, so firmly associated with the Goddess, came to be seen as more demonic figures. They were now believed to be the familiars of witches, or witches shape-shifted into animal form. Numerous stories tell of hunters led astray by hares who are really witches in disguise, or of old women revealed as witches when they are wounded in their animal shape. In one well-known story from the area near my village, a mighty hunter named Bowerman disturbed a coven of witches practicing their rites, and so one witch determined to take revenge upon the man. She shape-shifted into a hare and led the hunter into a deadly bog, then turned Bowerman and his hounds to stones which can still be seen today.

Though rabbits were sometimes viewed as good luck symbols (hence the tradition of carrying a "lucky rabbit's foot"), rabbits could also be portents of misfortune and disaster. The appearance of a rabbit on the main street of a village was believed to presage a coming fire, while a rabbit crossing one's path in the morning was an indication of trouble ahead. Hares are also widely associated with madness due to the wild abandon of their mating rituals. The expression "Mad as a March hare" comes from the leaping and boxing of hares during the mating season.

Further Reading

Folklore:

Rabbits Everywhere by Alicia Ezpeleta (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996)

Symbolic and Mythological Animals by J.C. Cooper (HarperCollins, 1992)

American Indian Trickster Tales edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz (Viking, 1998)

African Folktales by Roger Abrahams (Pantheon, 1983)

Cajun Folk Tales by J.J. Reneaux (August House, 1992)

The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus by Joel Chandler Harris (Houghton Mifflin edition, 2002)

Fantasy Fiction:

Watership Down by Richard Adams (Rex Collins/Macmillan, 1972)

Frost Dancers by Garry Kilworth (HarperCollins, 1992)

The Wood Wife by Terri Windling (Tor, 1996)

Hannah's Garden by Midori Snyder (Viking, 2002)

Medicine Road by Charles de Lint (Subterranean Press, 2004)

Tricksters

Rabbits and hares have appeared as mischievous Trickster figures in folktales ranging from Asia and Africa to North and South America. In the *Panchatantra* tales of India, for instance, Hare's cleverness and cunning is

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How would you cope with being pulled into a land where magic exists and you're the people's only hope? Peter Burns doesn't believe in magic. But when horses talk to you and a witch hound swoops out of the sky, how long can you disbelieve?
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tested by the wiles of Elephant and Lion, while in Tibetan tales, Hare must outwit the ruses of the predatory Tiger. Many peoples of West Africa (such as the Yoruba of Nigeria and Benin, and the Wolof of Senegal) tell stories of a cunning, deceitful Hare who is equal parts rascal, lecher, buffoon, and culture hero. African Hare stories traveled to North America on the slavers' ships, and (with some influence from with the rabbit tales of the Cherokee and other Native American tribes) were transformed into the classic Br'er Rabbit stories of the American south. The Br'er Rabbit stories (as related by "Uncle Remus") were written down and published by Joel Chandler Harris in the 19th century; his collection included the famous tale of Br'er Rabbit, the Tar Baby, and the briar patch. At the same time that Chandler Harris was recording Br'er Rabbit stories from the Black American oral tradition, folklorist Alcee Fortier was setting down the stories from the Cajun (French Creole) culture of southern Louisiana—including delightful tales of a rascally rabbit trickster by the name of Compair Lapin.

Although the Coyote tales of the American Southwest are probably the best known Native American trickster stories, there's also a strong tradition of Rabbit or Hare as trickster, particularly among the Algonquin speaking peoples of the central and eastern woodland tribes. Nanabozho (also known as Manabozho or Nanabush) is the Great Hare – a powerful figure found in the tales of the Cree, Algonquin, Ottawa, Ojibwa, Fox, Sauk, and Menominee tribes. In some stories, he's a revered culture hero – creator of the earth and of humankind, the bringer of light and fire, the founder of various arts and crafts, and teacher of sacred rituals. In other tales he's a clown, a thief, a lecher, or a cunning predator – an ambivalent, amoral figure who dances on the line between right and wrong. Among the Pottawatomie, Nanabozho is the eldest of four brothers, shaped like an ordinary man. Here it's the third brother, Wabosso, who is takes the form of the Great White Hare and travels north to become a great magician among the supernaturals.

The "jackalope" legends of the American Southwest are stories of more recent vintage, consisting of purported sightings of rabbits or hares with horns like antelopes. The legend may have been brought to North American by German immigrants, derived from the Rauriackl (or horned rabbit) of the German folklore tradition. The jackalope legend might also derive from actual horn-like growths found on the heads and faces of rabbits infected with *Shope papillomavirus*, a rare, disfiguring disease found among the wild rabbit population.

Magical Tales of Hares and Rabbits

Moving from myth and folklore to literature, rabbits and hares have figured prominently among the great works of children's fiction—most notably in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1901) and other tales by the British author and illustrator Beatrix Potter. Potter, who'd been raised virtually imprisoned in her London house by strict Victorian parents, found solace and escape during summer vacations spent in the countryside of the Lake District. Despite little formal training (she was allowed to take only twelve painting lessons at the age of seventeen), she taught herself to draw and paint by painstakingly observing and copying nature. Her charming stories of rabbit and mice, with their delicate, distinctive watercolor illustrations, were originally created as letters sent to children of her acquaintance. These little stories proved so popular that she attempted to find a commercial publisher for them, but settled on publishing *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* herself after six companies turned her down. The print run sold out instantly, and caught the attention of editor Norman Warne at Frederick Warne & Company. Not only did he take on the publication of Potter's books, but he fell in love with the author too — and *Peter Rabbit* went on to become one of the best loved animal stories of all time.

This painting by Charles Robinson is taken from Margaret's Book *by H. Fielding-Hall.*

Other well-known literary rabbits include Lewis Carroll's natty, time-obsessed White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, and his wild-eyed March Hare at the Mad Hatter's surreal tea party. Rabbit in *Winnie the Pooh* by A.A. Milne is another creature much loved by children, as is the stuffed toy who becomes a real bunny in Margery Williams' *The Velveteen Rabbit* and, more recently, the devilish vampire rabbit in *Bunnicula* by Deborah and James Howe.

In magical fiction for adult readers, *Watership Down* by Richard Adams is, of course, the great rabbit saga of our age, and comes complete with the mythological underpinnings of an elaborate rabbit mythology. Less well known, but also delightful, is Garry Kilworth's *Frost Dancers*, a magical novel set among the hares inhabiting the Scottish highlands. A rabbit girl from the Sonoran desert of Arizona appears, rather shyly, in my own con-

temporary fantasy novel *The Wood Wife*, and one of her cousins turns up in the Arizona portion of Charles de Lint's mythic novel *Forests of the Heart*. *Medicine Road*, also by Charles de Lint, features a woman who was once a jackalope among its cast of characters deperately trying to hang on to her human skin, human life, and human lover. Midori Snyder's enchanting novel *Hannah's Garden* contains one of the most compelling rabbit trickster figures in recent years, woven into a contemporary story about art, gardening, Irish music, and complexity of family bonds.

In films and cartoons, Bugs Bunny is the best-known rabbit Trickster of our age—equal parts rascal and culture hero, he's an absolutely classic Trickster type. Before Bugs, however, came Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, the first successful cartoon character created by the Walt Disney Studios, pre-dating the better known Mickey Mouse. Thumper the rabbit from the Disney film *Bambi* (1942) was also an enormously popular figure—and became, oddly, an image used for World War II posters and insignia, one picture shows Thumper gleefully riding, feet first, on the back of a bomb. In the classic film *Harvey* (1950) Jimmy Stewart played a man whose boon companion was an invisible six-foot-three inch rabbit; it's a wonderful story that makes clever use of traditional Irish phooka legends. More recently, rabbits have appeared in the exuberantly animated film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, in the bizarre horror flick *The Night of the Lepus*, and as a chilling presence in the stylish and surreal cult film *Donnie Darko*.

Whether hovering above us in the arms of a moon goddess or carrying messages from the Netherworld below, whether clever or clownish, hero or rascal, whether portent of good tidings or ill, rabbits and hares have leapt through the myths, folktales, and legends of peoples all around the world – forever elusive, refusing to be caught and bound by a single definition. The precise meaning, then, of the ancient Three Hares symbol carved into my village church is just as elusive, contradictory, and mutable as the myths behind it. It is a goddess symbol, a Trickster symbol, a symbol of the Holy Trinity, a symbol of death, redemption and rebirth...all these and so much more.

Now, as I walk through Devon lanes in the long twilight of a summer's eve, the rabbits dart out of the hedgerows, stare at me with dark, unblinking eyes, and disappear again over the crest of the shadowed hills. I'm reminded of a 19th century children's poem by Walter de la Mare:

In the black furror of a field
I saw an old witch-hare this night
And she cocked a lissome ear
And she eyed the moon so bright
And she nibbled of the green,
And I whispered 'Whsst! witch-hare,'
Away like a ghostie o'er the field
She fled, and left the moonlight there. ❧

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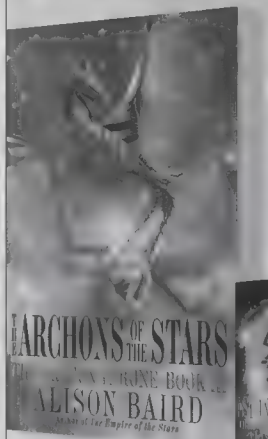

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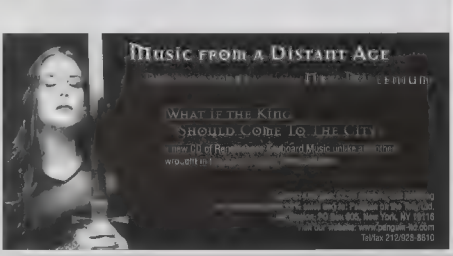

By Gahan Wilson & Paul Witcover

A supernatural gothic tale with all the flavor of the Old South.

THIS IS CHERIE PRIEST'S FIRST NOVEL and though that shows to some extent as the novel morphs subtly into various different kinds of novels, all those novels are good ones and she manages to blend them very entertainingly. The stories they tell and the characters they present continue to hold the full attention of the reader, certainly this reader, from the first page of the book to its last.

Four and Twenty Blackbirds (Tom Doherty Associates, New York, trade paperback, $14.95) is deeply American Southern and takes some really nice turns within that genre, including a number of riffs on race and racism, specifically on the really rich complications that ensue when our diverse races mix and start turning out rich and varied rainbow offspring. I found this both absorbing and extremely hopeful, its kindly teaching very likely will slowly dawn on very many who read this tale how much more all-around interesting and sprightly this world is likely to be when we all drop this business of hiding out from one another and let nature take its course.

John Jude Palencar's art adorns the cover of Cherie Priest's Four and Twenty Blackbirds.

The spooky element is nicely gothic, involves a lot of digging up of scads of family ghosts both psychological and supernatural, and has a lot of fun exploring the lasting and still highly active damage the mad leader of a spooky voodoo cult bequeathed to us all because of his grotesque activities.

Priest is very good at showing her gutsy heroine as she bravely and determinedly burrows deeper and deeper into extremely repellent gothic locales. These range from her grim exploration of a very well-depicted abandoned madhouse and the files of its offices stuffed full of moldering documents packed with ancient sorrows, to a lovely James Whale sort of romp in a classic old, dark house complete with sinister butler and a mad and ominous owner, to a determined hunt to find a lost book packed with evil wisdom before it crumbles altogether into mold and dust.

The men in this book are varied and well depicted and the author is more than kind to them considering their various drawbacks. But they are strictly secondary to the women, who are truly as satisfyingly doughty a bunch of females as you could wish for. Even the weirdest and most disturbing of them satisfy, including the mournful ghosts you encounter very early on to the extremely dinky but bottomlessly nasty ancient Eliza Dufresne, who doesn't actually show up until the last half of the book.

The best of them all, understandably and appropriately, is young Eden Moore, the heroine of *Four and Twenty Blackbirds*, who is given the very hard assignment of surviving a long series of bizarre and highly exciting encounters with widely varied menaces. Eden pretty much succeeds in trying to figure out what motivates the other characters' weird and dangerous activities and does her very best, which is considerable, to forgive all of them their failings, large and small.

I enjoyed this author's book and am very much looking forward to her next one.

The Book of Renfield—A Gospel of Dracula by Tim Lucas (Touchstone Books, New York, trade

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It is certainly odd, perhaps even perverse, how many people truly love, in a really cozy, almost cuddly sort of way Bram Stoker's classic horror novel *Dracula*

I suppose one reason is that their first exposure to the King of Vampires probably took place in a movie theater together with dear young friends or possibly they even had the good luck to share it with a first love along with comforting candy and popcorn and the chance to make pleasantly creepy jokes about it afterward and to join in nervous laughter against the darkness to which the film had given them just a little peep

I'd say it's pretty obvious Lucas went through some such introduction since amongst his list of dedications he is careful to list the movie actors whose portrayals of poor, mad Renfield he found particularly inspirational

What Lucas has done in creating this fine entertainment is technically and emotionally most ingenious. It expands what Stoker originally made available from the diaries of Dr John L. Seward and other main figures in the original *Dracula* It has Seward decide to completely reveal all of his records of in-depth interviews with Renfield, including transcripts of recordings made on Edison/Bell cylinders, and material found in Renfield's own personal notebook *The Book of Renfield* is made up of this material together with quotes from the original *Dracula* itself which are always printed in bold type to avoid any confusion on the part of the reader

This means that for the first time, anyone interested in Dracula, and I assume that would include a sizable percentage of the readers of this magazine, will be able to learn many highly illuminating facts about the unfortunate Renfield down to his very first memories, including the chilling and ongoing presence of a sinister carpethag much like the one the awful Count employed to bring a baby back to his castle to give his ghastly brides a little something to snack from

In this way Lucas brilliantly transforms Renfield from a tricky giver out of hints to Seward and the other heroes of the original book (who were desperately trying to make intelligent and useful guesses about the awful creature they were valiantly attempting to destroy) into a whole other sort of literary being altogether. Renfield becomes, in short, a ghastly sort of Watson to a monstrous version of Holmes. It's really quite a remarkable performance!

The best thing about the book is that it's clearly written by someone who likes battered, sad, nutty Renfield, someone who wants to make a case for him and does a very good job of it Having read it I now realize I've always felt a little shortchanged concerning Renfield, both in the original book and in all of the movies I always wanted to see a little more of him, to know a little more about what had beaten him into being such a being, wanted to let him have a little more say

So I'm very grateful someone's finally come along to help him out

Glass Soup by Jonathan Carroll, Tor Books New York; trade hardcover, 316 pp , $24 95

Once again you have the great good fortune to be able to read a new book by Jonathan Carroll and that's a lucky break, indeed, because Carroll is one of the best living writers of grownup fantasy

Glass Soup is a sequel to *White Apples* but though it would be a good idea to read the one before the other because of the accumulation of riches, Carroll has sculpted this new book in such a way that it stands easily on its own

Both books concern the great and growing love between Isabelle Neukor and Vincent Bunch and take place both here in this amazing world of the living and in the equally amazing afterlives to which we go when we die.

These afterlives are very personal since they are made up of our dreams and our task is to see through those dreams, one by one

An author less brilliant than Carroll would be sure to get himself deeply into trouble pretty early on with such a ground plan but his extraordinary imagination, humor and humanity are more than up to the challenge

Let me give you just one example of how brilliantly he plays with things like a set of interlitting Chinese boxes: When poor Character A becomes convinced that the total bizarreness of his weird afterlife must surely indicate the whole thing's a mere preliminary

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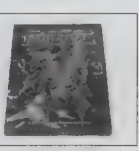

The Blood on the Reik trilogy is based on the immensely popular *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*. To find out more about this game of dark fantasy adventure please visit www.blackindustries.com.

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to his being tossed into Hell with it's lakes of bubbling brimstone, he decides to visit God's office, which he's noticed many times before but avoided going to because of sheer terror. He is deeply puzzled when he sees God is an enormous Polar Bear, then love flows over him when he realizes it is Bob, the stuffed polar bear he adored as a child. Finally his heart sinks when it seems Bob wants him to do something more terrifying than diving into pools of bubbling brimstone.

With almost any other author I would be careful not to give away such a scene but *Glass Soup* is so full of such flights, so packed with them, there's no problem at all. I could go on and on with such gems and still not scratch the surface.

Also be warned, if you read fantasy to get away from the grim and painful emotional realities of life I would particularly recommend you skip Carroll's work.

On the other hand if you're are hurting and would like some very good teachings on the management and treatment of such hurts, I would very much recommend you read Carroll's works.

There's really nobody like him.

Graphics Classics: H.G.Wells, Eureka Productions, Mount Horeb, WI, trade paper back, 144 pp., $11.95

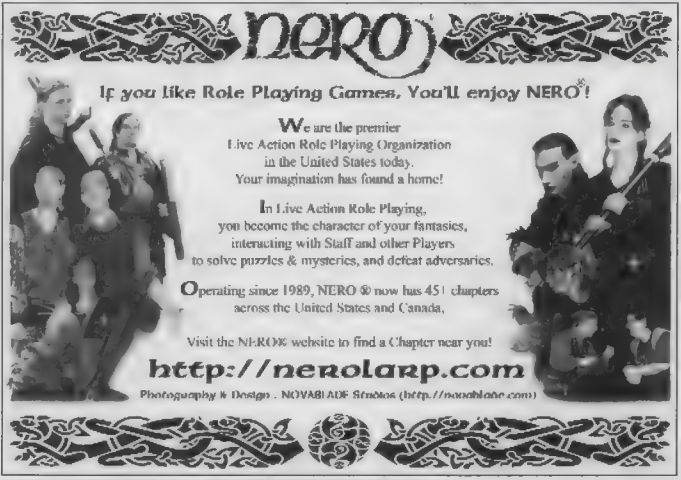
Just a note at the end to let you know that Graphics Classics has brought out a hugely expanded version—no less than 95 new pages—of their "graphic anthology" of many of the great H.G. Wells' work. Some are very well known, while others may be quite new to you; all are edited by Tom Pomplun and

adapted and drawn by some of the best authors/ artists presently working in the field. As with all Graphic's collections it is well worth your time.

Gahan Wilson

Lord Byron's Novel: The Evening Land, (William Morrow, New York, hardcover, 352 pp., $25.95, ISBN 0-06-055658-7)

John Crowley's extraordinary new book, may not be a flawless masterpiece itself, but it contains one. With consummate skill and no little audacity, Crowley weaves together three strands of story that not only reflect and refract back and forth across time and various congruent realities, historical and fictional, but, as if incidentally, recapitulate the history of the novel from its epistolary beginnings to its postmodern present. Part detective story, part romance, part adventure, part Gothic, part alternate history, and far more than the sum of its parts, this engrossing chimera of a book is Crowley's most accessible novel to date, one that a literate mainstream audience may well embrace, given its subject matter and its affinities to such bestsellers as A.S. Byatt's *Possession*. But it is also a characteristic Crowley novel, which means that it is constructed with genius and cunning. In 2002, Alexandra "Smith" Novak, a young researcher for a feminist Web site, strongwomanstory.org, flies to England in pursuit of financing from a rich eccentric, Georgiana Poole-Hatton. Soon after Smith's arrival, Georgiana is offered the chance to buy a trove of recently discovered papers that belonged to Ada Byron King, the daughter of Lord "Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know" Byron, and a close friend of Charles Babbage, inventor of the Difference Engine. Ada, a gifted mathematician, seems to have foreseen the potential of Babbage's Engine more clearly than he did, writing what is generally acknowledged to be the first workable computer program. The seller, a slight, gray-haired man with a gold earring in one ear, can tell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OF WATER AND DRAGONS

By Kelley Heckart

Of Water and Dragons weaves together the Roman history and Celtic lore of ancient Britain to create an unforgettable story of love and sacrifice.

"Author Kelley Heckart's compelling verbiage and tightly-wrought plot grab from page one with a tenacious intensity evocative of the early classics of fantasy fiction... Of Water and Dragons is an appealing amalgam of magic, erotica, military history, and romance that will leave readers breathless in its wake."

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them precious little about the papers, nor can he authenticate them. Georgiana buys them nevertheless.

Among the papers are notes in Ada's hand, written as she lay on her deathbed, purporting to annotate a novel written by her father. There is also a single page in Byron's hand, which may be a fragment of that novel. And there are hundreds of sheets of paper covered with rows of numbers. In e-mails with her mathematician lover, Thea, back in the States, Smith explores the possibility that these pages are a computer program of sorts encoding Byron's novel—an exciting prospect, for no extended prose work of Byron's survives. His publisher, egged on by his wife, burned his memoirs after his death, and such (within Crowley's work) was thought to be the fate of the novel as well. But Smith turns out to be right, and the numbered pages, deciphered by Thea, provide the text of Byron's "lost" novel, *The Evening Land*.

Crowley's novel consists of these three threads: e-mail exchanges between Smith and Thea and, later, Smith and her estranged father (a filmmaker based on Roman Polanski and self-exiled from the States for the same reason) about the process of deciphering and editing Byron's novel; Ada's chapter by chapter notations; and, finally, the novel itself, which takes up most of Crowley's book.

This last is an astonishing tour de force of literary mimicry; no, it goes beyond that, for one feels, upon reading *The Evening Land*, that whether or not it is the novel Byron would have written, it is the novel he should have written. This novel-within-the-novel, set in the early 1800s, tells the story of Ali, the bastard son of a notorious English rakehell, Lord Sane, who is raised as an orphan in Albania before being reclaimed by his father for selfish reasons and brought back to England to complete his upbringing as a member of the aristocracy. Murder, flight, incest, doppelgangers, mesmerism, zombies, events strange and possibly supernatural—in short, all the lurid characteristics of the Gothic novel—are on display in these pages, recounted with verve in the capacious and seductive voice of Byron.

But Ali's story is also the story of Byron himself, refracted through the lens of fiction. A lot of these connections are made explicit by Ada's notes, which also, quite movingly—especially as her health deteriorates, when, under the influence of opium, they take on a dreamy, clairvoyant quality—relate the story of her relationship with her father, whom she never knew while he was alive, and was raised to think of as an evil scoundrel, yet nonetheless came to champion and to love, choosing to be buried beside him. The love uniting these two characters, who never meet in the flesh, suffuses Crowley's novel and transcends it.

Further helpful glosses on Byron's novel are provided in the e-mails referred to earlier. Most important of these is the sequence exchanged between Smith and her father. The situation of this father and daughter mirrors that of Byron and Ada, and it is both poignant and fitting that this project should be the means of reconciliation between them. But it is more than that.

For if we are careful readers (and with Crowley one must be nothing less), we learn early on that the man who delivered Lord Byron's original manuscript of *The Evening*

Land to Ada was the very man who, 154 years later, offered the papers for sale to Georgiana. This man, in a subsequent e-mail message to Smith, identifies himself as "Ronny J. Welch," a monicker that screams anagram. And so it is, for John Crowley. Is this a mere postmodern conceit, the author appearing in his own work and tipping a sly wink to the reader? With a lesser writer, one might be content to think so. But not with Crowley.

Crowley is fascinated by time and its handmaiden, death. A recurrent theme in his work, from at least *Little, Big* on, is the attempt to escape from death and the flawed creation of which it is a part. Byron's redolent title, *The Evening Land*, suggests the Garden of the Hesperides, that mythic land in the far west associated with death: where reside the golden apples of immortality. Hesperia was also the name the Greeks gave to Italy, and thus the title also serves as a kind of foreshadowing of Byron's own death, which took place in Greece following a sojourn in Italy. It is from Italy that the manuscript of his novel, that golden apple of literary immortality, and perhaps more, comes to Ada. And it is to that mythic land, America, that one of the main characters of Byron's novel departs, with his daughter, at that novel's end.

By introducing himself, or his double, into the novel as he does, Crowley implies that similar figures may exist in, and be the secret motivating agents of, our own lives. Thus, the situation between Smith and her father is not just a historical echo of the relationship between Ada and Byron, nor is it just a thematic echo. In some mysterious way, the reconciliation of the former actually is the reconciliation of the latter, and always has been.

It seems almost churlish, presented with such a rich and rewarding novel, to wish for more, yet I do wish the framing narrative, featuring Smith et al., had the emotional intensity of the other two sides of the triangle. It runs a fairly placid course, and I felt this detracted from the book's cumulative impact. But don't get me wrong: *Lord Byron's Novel: The*

Evening Land is Crowley's greatest achievement since *Little, Big*, and in many ways even surpasses it. It is a more hopeful book and, I think, a wiser one, not at all elegiac, as if, in the years separating them, Crowley has won through to a faith that embraces the whole wide world.

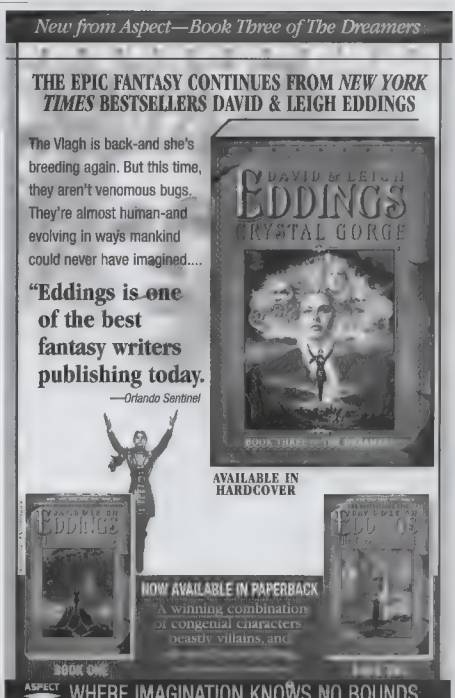
The Prodigal Troll, Charles Coleman Finlay, Pyr Books, New York, hardcover, 357 pp $25.00, ISBN 1-59102-313-0

The Prodigal Troll—the title yields its full significance only when the novel is finished—is set in a land of clashing cultures and races. The leading power, also the most recently arrived, is a medieval-style absolute monarchy that, while ruled by a king and administered by men (and eunuchs) owing fealty to the king, is matriarchal in its laws of inheritance and ownership, yet even so, women remain in an inferior position. To the north are groups of nomads suggestive of American Indian tribes like the Sioux, where men are hunters and warriors free to follow the dictates of their consciences and women are relegated to subordinate roles as wives, mothers, and food preparers. The land's indigenous inhabitants live in mountainous regions more northerly still. These are the trolls: huge, non-human, nocturnal creatures of prodigious strength and limited intellect who, like the pseudo-Indians, live in tribes, but unlike them practice a pure form of democracy in which every troll, male and female, has an equal vote.

The novel tells the story of a human boy, Claye, who, through a chain of unlikely events, is adopted by a female troll and raised as her own Maggot, to use the boy's troll name, gradually realizes that he is not a troll but a human being, and this understanding compels him, in young manhood, to leave his mother and seek his destiny among humankind. There he encounters and falls in love with a beautiful young woman, the daughter of the local lord. Unknown to Maggot/Claye, but not to readers, he is the son of the previous lord and lady, whose violent overthrow is recounted in the novel's opening pages. Presumed dead, he is a time bomb whose true identity, should it ever be discovered, will have profound ramifications both for himself and the current regime.

It is surely no accident that the novel *Troll* most resembles, to the point of being both corrective and homage, is Edgar Rice Burroughs's masterpiece, *Tarzan of the Apes*, whose hero, after all, is named Clayton. *Troll* has all the compulsive readability of that novel, with none of its racism.

Troll takes after its chief model in another, less fortunate, respect: It is not interested in women save peripherally, as they relate to its male hero and his adventures on the road from boy to man. To dwell on this blind spot however, would be itself a kind of blindness. *The Prodigal Troll* is a strong first effort by a young writer who could well become a major voice in the genre. ❧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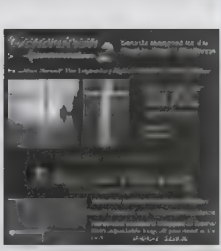

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ROBOTS and FALLING HEARTS

BY TIM PRATT AND GREG VAN EEKHOUT
ILLUSTRATION BY PETER FERGUSON

Down in their innermost hearts, people expect the occasional rain of frogs or blood, people bursting into spontaneous flames, animals speaking in human tongues. Such things are part of our shared heritage, the mysteries of human history, and while they might confound and frighten us, deep down, they don't feel *wrong*.

But no one knew quite how to react to the recent plague of robots.

I went to Los Angeles, because it was supposed to be the worst there, maybe even the place where the plague started, robots going unnoticed for a long time because of Hollywood. For a while people assumed the robots were props or publicity stunts or refugees from public-access television junkyard wars, until it became obvious that they were something more.

My first day in the city I sat at a table outside Peet's in Brentwood, sipping a caramel apple cider, watching the beautiful people walk by. This was much nicer than crouching on an exposed, frozen mountainside, sipping barley tea flavored with rancid yak butter—though that experience had its charms, too.

Half an hour after I sat down I saw my first L.A. robot, crouched on top of a passing BMW. The robot was like a starfish made of articulated metal, all chrome except for brass joints, and it clung to the car's roof rack, a whip antenna rising up from the center of its body. I wondered if the driver knew about his robotic passenger. I threw away my cup and went walking, ostensibly window-shopping, but really keeping my eyes open for more robotic manifestations.

I paused to tie a loose shoelace and a squat robot, like a dirty white trashcan on tank-treads, trundled out of an alley toward me. A red light on top of its domelike top blinked erratically. It said, in a high-pitched voice "Klaatu barada nikto." A small panel slid open in its front, and a pole with a cup on the end telescoped out. There were a few coins in the cup, mostly pennies and nickels, and the robot jingled the cup significantly.

"Take me to your leader," I said, wishing it could be that simple, knowing that these things are never that simple.

The robot beeped at me and jingled its cup harder, the coins rattling.

REALITY IS GENERALLY AGREED TO BE A FAIRLY
DEMOCRATIC CONSENSUS AFFAIR.
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN IT BECOMES A DICTATORSHIP?

"It won't go away unless you give it some change," said a woman standing on the corner "It followed me all the way to work one day, and hung around outside the door like a dog for hours."

"Yeah?" I said, taking a good look at her. She wasn't uncommonly pretty, but I'd been on assignment in the Himalayas for several months previous, and she was the first woman who'd spoken to me in seasons. "Has it been around here long?"

She shrugged "I guess. Even a penny will get rid of it."

I looked down at the robot. "Piss off," I said, enunciating clearly, just to see what it would do.

A low grinding noise came from deep inside the robot's squat body, and I took a step back, expecting something nasty to happen. Instead it just said "Danger! Danger!" and flailed its single arm around wildly for a moment, coming dangerously close to spilling its coins

I gave in and dropped a quarter into its cup The robot beeped contentedly and rolled away

"See?" the woman said.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said. "Do you remember the first time you saw a robot here in the city?"

"Sure," she said. "Everybody remembers that." But then the light changed, and she started to cross the street

"Um," I said, going after her. "If I could have just a moment "

She continued walking, and with a half glance over her shoulder, she reached into her purse and came out with a jangling cluster of keys attached to a matte black cylinder Pepper spray, I figured. Or maybe a TASER

"I'm a student," I said, pulling up even with her "I mean, sort of, I'm a student. And I'm doing research on the robot plague, and if I could interview you, it would only take a few minutes—"

Her thumb moved over a little red button on the top of her keychain, and when we reached the curb, she turned and looked me up and down As she performed a threat-assessment on me, I decided that, in her own way, she really was rather attractive I liked the freckles sprinkling her round cheeks, and despite the hard set to her jaw, her pale lips formed pleasing, sensuous curves. Her hands were slender but strong thick-veined, with blunt, unpainted fingernails, hands built for more than office work The sun caught coppery highlights in her brown hair, which she wore pulled back into a tight pony tail, leaving just a few free strands that floated with liquid grace in the slight breeze.

After a moment, her shoulders relaxed a little, and she started holding the keychain the way one holds a keychain instead of the way one holds an anti-creep weapon "If you want to know about the robots," she said, "you should be talking to City Hall or the cops or the brainiacs at Caltech. I don't even subscribe to the newspaper. I just live here."

I was about to tell her that I didn't want so-called expert opinions, that I'd read all the official reports and already knew what the politicians and pundits and consultants had to say, that what I really needed, if I were going to get to the bottom of this thing, was the word on the street, and that she smelled of oranges and shampoo and that after spending weeks on the edge of a frozen rock in a tent that smelled of sweat and farts and men, I really wanted to buy her lunch. But a mechanical voice cut me off before I could even get two or three words out

"Whizmo "

"Oh, great," the woman said "Now it's Whizmo " She grabbed my wrist and started tugging me down the sidewalk

"Whizmo!"

She dragged me beneath an overpass, behind a broad concrete support pillar, as the vast clattering grew louder I started to speak, and she covered my mouth with her hand—it was all I could do not to kiss her palm

From behind the pillar, we watched as Whizmo zoomed by His original shape was wholly obscured by the spoilers, stick-on rearview mirrors, handlebars, small plastic Buddhas, and other assorted junk bristling from his frame, all of it banging together, reminding me of certain mountain ceremonies useful in dispelling ghosts and unfriendly wildlife When Whizmo was out of sight, she took her hand from my mouth "He used to be a pretty boring robot," she said. "He looked like a gas-powered generator on wheels. But then the neighborhood kids started sticking bumper stickers on him, and someone else attached a bicycle horn and some reflectors, and it went on from there. Now he chases people until they add something to his chassis. Whizmo knocked down a guy once, but he wasn't hurt too badly."

I thought of Master Tenzin's temple, which he encouraged visitors to embellish with carvings and drawings and the occasional glob of chewing gum, and his story of the group of explorers who visited his first temple forty years before When asked to add their own touches to that temple, the drunken explorers burned the building down. After the flames died, Master Tenzin stood in the midst of the ashes, turning slowly around, then knelt and drew a single jagged line in the soot. The explorers, who'd expected to break the Master's preternatural calm, jeered at him, but then went on their way. They died in an avalanche that afternoon, but when I drew the obvious conclusion that Master Tenzin's drawing had somehow contributed to that snowy death, he merely shook his head, sadly, as if I'd missed the point

"You were going to tell me about the first time you saw the robots," I said. We were still standing very close together. Getting back to the business at hand seemed the wisest course

She stepped away, out of arm's reach. "No, you asked me to. I told you to ask people who actually *know* something."

I nodded. I sighed. "See," I said. "See. The thing is. And this isn't something that just anyone knows. But Well Look, where do *you* think the robots come from?"

She shrugged. "I guess it's just a bunch of people building them for fun, setting them loose all over the world. Or maybe it's like a government experiment in artificial intelligence; they build a bunch of robots and release them to see if they can learn Who knows?"

"Nobody knows," I said. "But everyone began from the assumption that the robots were *built*, just like you did. The thing is, the scientists have broken a lot of these robots open, they've checked out the mechanisms and these robots shouldn't work *at all*. There's machinery inside them, circuit boards and wires and even the occasional vacuum tube, but none of it's connected in a way that makes sense These things .. they're more like *sculptures* of robots than real robots But there it is, inarguably, they work! They move, they interact, they learn. Some of them steal! Some of them harass! Some of them save children from burning buildings! Some of them gouge potholes in the roadways, and some of them repair broken traffic lights! They do all these things, when they shouldn't be able to do anything at *all*!"

She blinked I realized I'd been shouting I get excited

"I haven't heard about anything like that," she said. "About how they shouldn't work "

"Yeah, well," I said. "It's not something the officials are spreading around. I'm only telling you because I want your help You were here when it started The first time the robots showed up, in the first place."

"We thought it was a publicity thing for some sci-fi movie," she said

"So tell me about it "

She shook her head "Who *are* you? How do you know that the scientists are keeping secrets? What exactly are you trying to find *out*? You said you're a student?"

"Sort of a student " I thought about how to explain my job—my calling—and what I hoped to find out about the plague of robots Random words and images appeared in my mind. A childhood fas-

The thing is, the scientists have broken a lot of these robots open, they've checked out the mechanisms ... and these robots shouldn't work at *all*.

creation with the Fiji mermaid. That disastrous internship with the Society for Fortean Studies. Cryptophenomenology. The corporate-sponsored codification of transcendental experiences. How I'd gone to the Himalayas to investigate a levitating monk and, instead, met Master Tenzin.

Ah, but Master Tenzin had taught me how to respond in such situations, when the very complex needed to be communicated in a succinct and interesting way.

"I'd better tell you a parable," I said.

"You know, no offense, but I'm not really one of those yoga, tofu people ... "

"Yoga's good for your back," I said absently, sorting through my days spent at the feet of Master Tenzin. Should I tell her of the ram and the shepherd? Of the king and the bamboo sliver? Of the fat man and the paper chair?

No.

Of all the lessons I took from the cold mountains, there seemed only one that might help her understand why I had come here, to this vast puzzle box of a city, to learn about the robots and thus peel back the secrets of the world.

So I told her this.

There was a man who sat at the edge of the market, surrounded by frogs of all manner: frogs blue as sapphire, frogs red as blood, frogs the size of a pea, frogs large as dogs, frogs bewinged, frogs with teeth, frogs with as many legs as a spider. Each day he squatted in the dust amidst a chorus of croaks, and wrote in tiny script on a crowded piece of parchment. It was said that the parchment listed and described every kind of frog on earth, and that when the last frog was properly catalogued, the old man would die.

One morning a boy came to the man, offering for sale a frog he had found by the river with eyes on stalks, like a snail. After some negotiation, the frog man gave the boy some few coins—a very fair trade—and yet the boy remained.

"Why do you linger?" asked the frog man of the boy. "Is there something more you wanted?"

"Are you not going to list my frog?" the boy asked.

The frog man showed the boy a corner near the upper edge of the parchment, where the ink was old and faded. The writing described a frog with eyes like a snail's, and also a little boy who found a frog by a stagnant green river and brought the frog to an old man who spent his days scribbling in the market, surrounded by baskets and bamboo cages containing frogs. "But of course I have already written of this," the old man said. "Long ago. Otherwise, how would there have been a frog for you to find?"

And he told the boy to go home, and to write of his own frogs, so that when he became an old man there would still be frogs awaiting young boys by the river.

The woman smirked and cocked her head, and I entertained the notion that there was a remote possibility she found me cute. "Okay," she said, "It'll be your Grasshopper. So, the little boy is you, and the frogs are the robots, and the old man expresses the indistinguishable natures of cause and effect. Yeah? Did I get it right?"

Her eyes were the color of iced tea in the sun.

"No, you did not get it right."

We both spun toward the voice at our backs. A six-foot tall robot like a barber poll mounted on a single bicycle wheel rolled towards us, spinning a ribbon of silver and gold and bronze. Here and there it was decked out with chrome and leather trim, like the backseat of a car in *American Graffiti*, and it exuded the smells of clean oil and menthol. Its head, a polished globe as brilliant as a shaving mirror, extended towards us on a scissors-arm, and when I looked into it, I felt the sidewalk go a little sideways beneath my feet.

For it wasn't my face I saw reflected in the robot's head.

A battered face, with a bulbous nose, red eyes, and a split lip peered out at me, distorted by the curved nature of the sphere. Upon closer inspection, I realized that it *was* my face, but a horribly damaged, nearly unrecognizable version of it, beaten to pulp. Excitement gathered in the pit of my stomach. There was something here, something about the flesh as grass, something about the futility of desire and Earthly things. It had occurred to me—more than once, many times, in fact—it was the closest thing I had to a hypothesis at this point—that the robots were bodhisattvas for a new age, alien saints, holy fools. And this strange, bright, sleek thing before me was a—

"Fucking doombot," the woman said wearily.

The robot swung its sphere toward her, and I caught a glimpse of the shifting face in the sphere—now it was her face, hideously disfigured, and I looked away, far more disturbed by the thought of her flesh ravaged than I'd been at the sight of my own.

"You got it wrong," the doombot said, and made a snorting noise, mechanical but still full of disdain. It mimicked her viciously, perfectly: " 'The little boy is you, and the frogs are the robots, and the old man expresses the indistinguishable natures of cause and effect.' Bah! Parables aren't *metaphors*. They don't map exactly to a given situation—they provide insight. If that's what you got out of a parable, I despair to think of what you'd do with a koan!"

"It's no use talking to this doombot," she said. "All it ever does is bitch and belittle."

"But it seems to be conscious," I said. "It's speaking in complete sentences. I bet I could learn a lot from it. It's not like the others I've seen."

"You'd be wasting your time. The doombot was one of the first robots to show up here. It came the first day, and since it talked, everyone thought it was the spokesman, or the king, or something. The mayor's task force spent hours and hours interviewing it, and never got it to talk sense, or talk about its origins, or anything—it just complained and insulted them. Eventually they gave up and let it go. Now it's a free-range doomsayer."

The doombot extended its sphere toward her, and she swung at it irritably with her purse. "Thirty pounds of flax," the doombot muttered, jerking its head back. The sphere retracted, the face in its glass pixellating into nonsense. The barber-pole swirl started turning more quickly, and I began thinking about the endless spiral of life, a stairway to the infinite.

Then I cocked my head and frowned at the woman. "How do you know what the mayor's task force thought? I thought you did n't even read the papers?"

She sighed and looked away. "Because. I used to be part of the task force. My part didn't last long. I don't like to talk about it."

This was unreal—she'd had close, intimate contact with the first robots, had at the very least been fully briefed on the events of the day of their arrival. What a resource! I was, for a moment, ashamed for thinking of her in such utilitarian terms, but I *did* have a mission to fulfill. "What was your position on the task force?" I asked. Her face was still turned away from me, and the absence of her gaze made me feel like winter.

The doombot thrust its sphere between our heads. "Stupid stupids," it said, voice flat with disgust. "*I'll* tell you what her position was."

The woman lashed out at the sphere, striking it with the flat of her hand, making it swing away on the end of its scissors-arm and slam into the concrete pillar, where the glass shattered, little slivers of prismatic glass raining down. Half-demolished, the remaining part of the sphere looked like a cup with jagged edges. I leaned over, suddenly sure there was something inside the sphere, some revelation, some—

There was a small green frog inside. I think it looked back at me when I looked at it. It was hard to tell, because its eyes were on stalks, moving independently, like a snail's.

"Shit," the woman said. She hadn't seen the frog yet. "I didn't mean to do that. The sphere was always unbreakable before. Believe me, people try to break it all the time!"

The woman poked the gleaming shards of the doombot's head with her toe. While she was preoccupied, I bent down and

enclosed the frog in my cupped hands. Its skin was cool and soothing against my palms.

"Tell me," I said. "What did you do on the investigatory commission? What was your job?"

Her mouth formed a bitter smirk. "My job? I wouldn't call it a job. I answered questions. Every day for more than a month, I sat in various stuffy little rooms, or drafty offices, and I answered their questions. There were also some examinations—blood work, CT-scans, that kind of thing." Her eyes shone, and a tremor had crept into her voice. "But mostly, it was just questions."

I had caused her discomfort, as surely as a gunshot causes an avalanche. Though the mountainside may have been unstable before I fired the shot, the responsibility was still mine. I didn't want to cause her more distress. But I had to know. "What was it the commission hoped to learn from you?" My voice failed to express the regret I felt in pursuing this course.

"Think of a robot," she said, not looking at me.

"A robot? I don't know what you—"

"What color is it?" she snapped. "Silver? Bronze? Matte black? Green, like copper patina? Gray, like primer paint? Envision a color. Quickly."

"White," I said, and only after I said it did I realize that I had still been thinking about ice-capped mountains. The frog shifted in my hands. Loathe to hurt it, I loosened my grip.

"Don't *tell* me about the robot," she said. "Just think it."

She instructed me to think of the robot's size, its shape, its texture. She told me not to dwell on these features, but to lock onto the first coherent thing that entered my head. It was the sort of thought exercise that Master Tenzin might have led me through.

Finally, she asked me how it moved, and I knew the answer immediately.

The frog was still cold and smooth. But it was a different kind of cold. A different kind of smooth.

I released it on the ground. White as ice, it took a hop, and then another, its servos whirring as it made quick leaps toward the gutter. When it leaped again, the woman rushed forward and caught it in her purse.

"I made a robot," I said, astonished.

"Did *you*? Are you sure?"

"You made the robot?"

"Who made the robot is a question best left for philosophers." She made a dismissive gesture with her hand, and I tried not to feel insulted. "The question is: How do we stop it?"

From within her purse, the robot frog croaked. There was a bit of low fidelity 8-bit compression hiss behind the sound. "Why is it necessary to stop it? You said yourself that the robots are more an annoyance than a danger. I think they're beautiful in a way. Cryptophenomena, the secret weather of the world .. it's the song changing key. It's how nature turns the page on the book we've all been reading too long. It's the Tower of Babylon collapsing, forcing us to learn new languages, to adapt to new patterns, to *better* ourselves. When nature gives us something strange to deal with, we're forced to evolve." I'd grown excited again. Breathless. "I'm thankful for the robots," I concluded lamely. "I think they're going to transform us."

"Listen," she said, waving her hands as if dispelling a foul stink. "That's fine. That's fine as long as the robots are just funny alopiexes, or toy frogs, or even insulting barber poles. But I'm starting to think of bad robots." Her shoulders fell in extreme fatigue. Perhaps even despair. She took my both my hands in hers. "I'm starting to think of robots that scare me."

"Ah." I said, staring down at her hands. "I can see how that might be a problem. Some people are panicking, especially as the robots spread throughout the country. I guess, if enough people start to think about scary robots—"

"It doesn't take 'enough people,' " she said. "It just takes me."

"Buy *my* thoughts changed the frog, just then—"

"Did they?" she said quietly. "Did I? I don't know. But the robots don't change they don't *appear* . when I'm not around. I know that. They aren't born from nothing, from. I don't know, a-robogenesis. It has something to do with me."

I recalled Master Tenzin's warning that madness and enlightenment were separated by a membrane as thin as an ox's hair, and his caution that discovering one impossible thing did not automatically prove that all impossible things were true. Someone living every day in the company of robots might come to believe herself the center of the new metallic universe, even if it wasn't true.

But then, just a moment ago, I'd felt a tiny frog transform into a machine in my very hands. I should treat her statement as truth, and see what I could learn. Even the wrong path can lead to a place of beauty, after all. And she did smell quite marvelous. "If you are somehow related to the robots," I said slowly, "then I understand why you were on the mayor's commission, and why they might want to ask you a lot of questions. Probably very difficult questions."

"Even harder than 'what's the sound of one hand clapping,' " she said wryly.

"But what I don't understand is why they let you *quit*." And why I hadn't heard of her, when I'd had access to every piece of intelligence about the robots. But there was no reason to scare her with that kind of spook talk.

She let go of my hands and folded them in her lap. Her bag croaked, then made a sound like whirring servos. The frogbot was growling restless. She looked down at the shards of glass from the broken doombot. "I don't know why I trust you," she said. "Maybe because somebody who talks in parables and koans wouldn't bother to lie, when they can be confusing enough just telling the truth. They didn't let me off the commission—I *escaped*. They looked for me, but they couldn't find me. Then they stopped looking, because they forgot about me. They forgot about me *retroactively*. Everyone did. My presence on the commission was edited out of existence. Even the videotapes of our sessions changed. Consensual reality underwent a statutory rape."

I nodded, but I was thinking. Paranoia. Conspiracy theory. Delusions of grandeur.

She sighed. "You don't believe me. Listen. You asked me to tell you about the first day the robots came. I said you should ask someone else, because *everyone* remembers that. And everyone does. But I don't remember what everyone *else* remembers. What *they* remember is something like a golden mushroom growing up from the ground in the middle of Hollywood Boulevard, something like a closed bulb that opened up into a flower with fractal edges, and then the first robots came out, trundling, flapping, hopping, rolling. Some of the robots opened up their own little hatches or chutes or tubes, and other, smaller robots came out of their bodies, and skittered into the alleys and side streets, and then other robots began dismantling the mushroom-thing and running off, carrying the pieces with them. There was nothing left behind in the street except a big pothole. People clapped. They thought it was publicity for a movie, some sci fi spectacular. But then there were more robots, and more, and we all realized .. you know all this, right?"

"Sure." I'd read the same story, with countless variations, in the Pentagon's files.

"Of course. Everyone knows it. Except it's not what *happened*. The golden mushroom opened, and there was only one robot inside it, eight feet tall, shaped almost like a person, her body shining white as ice, with fingers of transparent crystal and eyes of cobalt glass. She spoke to the crowd—she told *them* why she'd come, and what she wanted to do, and what they all had to do. And then she opened a hinged door in her chest—where the heart would be, on a person—and tiny robots poured out, carrying pieces of bigger robots, and assembling them. They had tools, too, and they passed them out to people in the crowd. Everyone helped build the robots. Everyone understood why they were doing it." She was crying now, her head bent, tears dripping onto her hands and her purse in her lap.

"What did they understand?" I asked, and in a way, it was the same question I'd been asking myself for years. I wanted to understand, too.

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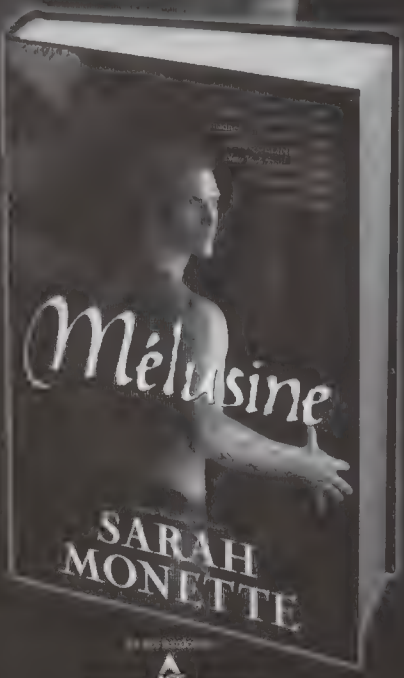

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"I don't remember," she said, voice hollow, almost mechanical "That's one of the things that changed, when I ran away from the commission. When *I* changed."

"Changed . . how?"

"You like parables, but I'm not good at those. I don't think Maybe I used to be. I used to be different I think I should just show you You see what I am You should see something of what I used to be "

She lifted her head and looked at me.

Her eyes were made of cobalt glass And her fingers, when she touched my hand, were heavy crystal, transparent.

Nothing else about her had changed

Everything about everything else had changed

The ground beneath my feet Black glass threaded with silver wires.

The shops and office buildings around me Big blocks that looked like gutted radios, hung with jungles of stripped cables, capacitors the size of hot water heaters, blobs of solder you'd have to carry with both hands.

The sky over my head The dull silver of a well-spent coin.

On the sidewalk, there were no people At least not people I'd come to recognize as people There were figures of glass and figures of bronze and figures of cobbled-together cell phones and computer peripherals and sprung audio tapes and pistons and hydraulic limbs The people moved about with their shopping bags and purses and brief cases, oblivious to the miracles they'd just become.

I held my own hand before my face. The hairs on my knuckles glinted silver Tiny lights blinked beneath my translucent plastic fingernails

And now I believed I believed this woman was what I'd hoped, and my heart soared with joy, my mission so close to completion. Mixed with those feelings, though, was a spiraling sense of panic. I had prepared all my life for a moment like this, but I was still a man of a world in which the rules of gravity and electromagnetism and temporal mechanics could be counted on to apply Hardwired into my brain was the notion that reality ought not be excessively elastic

"Can you change things back?" I asked

On the verge of hyperventilation, her chest rose and fell heavily "I don't know "

"It's okay if you can't," I assured her, trying to assure myself at the same time "But if you can, it would be very interesting to me "

She gathered herself, eyes closed Her glass hand was cold in my grip I shut my eyes, too

"Okay," she said after a moment. "Okay How's that?"

Something smashed on the ground near my feet. It was an oblong blob, red with rust, about the size of two joined fists Impact had cracked it open, revealing gears and wires and tubes Seconds later, another hit the ground a few yards away, and then another closer by. They were coming down more steadily now, one every several seconds Around us, people—and they *were* people again—ran for the cover of doorways

It was raining mechanical hearts, but given the presence of the Los Angeles robots, it didn't seem like an impossible situation

The girl once more looked like herself, flesh and freckles and brown eyes. Or, I should say, she looked like herself in this aspect of the world.

Gently, I drew her to me, held her close, the clean citrus smell of her hair filling my mind with unproductive thoughts "You are so, so beautiful," I murmured in her ear. "You are, perhaps, the most beautiful woman I have ever known. You are an incredibly beautiful re-weaver "

Abruptly, she pulled back from me. It felt as though someone had yanked my own heart out without anesthesia. "I'm a *what*" she said. "And no parables or koans or any of that Bhodi Tree crap Just tell me."

The people moved about with their shopping bags and purses and brief cases, oblivious to the miracles they'd just become.

Hearts continued to fall about us.

I winced, for what better way to let her know what she was, and how I had come to be with her today, now, on this street, ready to claim possession of this miracle, than the tale of the sea cow and the concubine? But maybe she was right Perhaps now was not the time I cleared my throat

"I told you of the man in the market who created the kingdom of frogs. A man who shaped the world with only the tools of his thoughts. Such people have always existed, and always will They bring the impossible into the world. Some are only slightly gifted, and they bring down rains of blood and whirlwinds of fish. In their wake, bulls speak with human tongues. People burst into flames. These re-weavers of the world are often oblivious to the influence they have on things around them But then there are men like my teacher, Master Tenzin. He knew what he was, what he could do, and he understood the nightmares he could unleash upon the world if he didn't discipline his mind and learn to calm his own heart So, near the high ceiling of the world, he created a small refuge for himself A place to meditate A place to sequester himself from the temptation to re-weave the world as he willed. When Westerners came and burned down his temple, he killed them In a moment of weakness, he drew a line in the ash and brought the mountain down upon them

"There were witnesses, of course—Sherpa guides from the village below. One of them understood the potential in what he'd just seen He understood its worth, and he knew there were people who would pay well for the information. So he contacted the United States government and told them of the incredible weapon living amidst charred rubble on the side of the mountain

"The Americans sent some of their best men, but they never found Master Tenzin. But decades later, they finally did catch up with his apprentice They caught up with me."

The girl stared. "And you're … one of us?" she asked "Like your Master Tenzin? Like me?"

I barked a laugh Does one confuse an apostle with Jesus? Does one credit an elf with being Santa Claus? "Oh, no, nothing like that," I said "I'm a mere student. A researcher. An observer. I have studied the secret weather of the world, as well as those who craft it. I came to Los Angeles to learn about the robots, and I have found so much more."

I dared to touch her cheek, just brushing it with my fingertips "Instead, I have found you "

Her expression grew hard. Hostile Those warm brown eyes darkened, and I felt a pang of fear. Only a fool would wish to make a re-weaver angry. I withdrew my hand.

"And now that you've discovered me," she said. "What's your plan?"

"My plan?

"I assume once the Americans found you, they decided to exploit your expertise "

Reluctantly, I nodded

"What am I to you, then? A weapon? Something to transform the arsenals of the government's rivals to sea cucumbers?"

"No, no, nothing like that—"

"Or will you keep me for yourself, like a genie in a bottle, a magical woman who grants your fondest wishes and wears a halter top? Will you use me like an engine and ride to power on my back? What *am* I to you?"

"You are the truth," I said. "You are a new truth, and you drive actuality By coming to understand you, I will come to understand everything. I am a student You are the master I have always wanted. And I think I love you."

My voice broke as I said these things.

She looked away for several long moments, as if going into a

Continued on page 84

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By Karen O'Connor

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At The QUEEN'S HOTEL

BY KATE RIEDEL ■ ILLUSTRATION BY WEB BRYANT

There is always a Queen's Hotel. ■ All up and down highways 6 or 4, in all the small towns on and off 7 into eastern Ontario, in all the out-of-the-way places with names no one can remember, the tourist traps lining Lake Huron, the one-industry towns where the industry has left town; dying burgs hoping to scrabble back to life if they can only get some sort of festival going. In these last bastions of old white Ontario, a few houses huddled together with a feed store, a grocery store, a gas station, there is always a Queen's Hotel. ■ Whoever picks me up, all I have to say is "Queen's Hotel," and I'll be dropped off at the nearest one. ■ This driver was a kid in jeans and nylon jacket, seed company cap slung backward on his head, his voice deep but yet unpracticed in its deepness. ■ "Where you headed?" ■ "Queen's Hotel," I said. "You playing there?" he asked as I fit the guitar in its case next to me on the pickup seat. "I play a little," he went on without waiting for an answer. "Mostly country. I guess that's what you play, that's an acoustic, right? The Queen's usually has rock bands, but they have country nights, too. They let me and my buddies play there once, we did OK, but they didn't want to take us on regular 'cause most of us were underage. But I ... "

Queens
Hotel

I let him talk for a while I watched the November countryside roll by, gray and empty in the twilight, the gold gone from the trees, the dreary fields not yet brightened by snow and cold winter light. Sometimes it was spring or summer, like a cup of water to a soul in hell, but this was definitely November.

The kid pulled up in front of the Queen's Motel and I got out before he could ask my name—in case I became famous, and then he could say he'd given me a ride once.

If this place had a name I hadn't seen it on a sign, and there was nothing on any of the few buildings to tell me. The Queen's Hotel was just the Queen's Hotel—yellow brick, white paint flaking off the wood trim, gambrel roof with six-sided shingles set in a pattern.

A bulletin board next to the door had a flyer tacked up announcing the Buck's Crossing Boys were playing tonight. What was the name of the band that had been playing the first time I walked into a Queen's Hotel? The Flatland Mountaineers? Or the Rockin' Rebs? No, the Rockin' Rebs would have come later, when folk had morphed into country rock. It had been summer, I remembered that, the scent of hay carried in from the countryside cut with gasoline and sun-hot tar from the road, nighthawks just starting their sweep across the sky, sweat down my back, the guitar in its case dragging down my arm.

I opened the frosted glass door and went into a big hall. Dark wood paneling, stairs with wooden bannisters cornering up into the dark. On one side a big counter of the same dark wood, with a wall of pigeonholes and key-hooks behind it. Nobody behind the counter.

On the other side was the bar. There were a couple of locals hunched over their drafts, but the evening crowd hadn't started trickling in. The only sign there would be a band was a couple of microphones and chairs already in place on a low stage.

The bartender looked up when I came in, and saw the guitar case.

"You with the band?" he asked.

"No. I just want a room for the night. Any chance of a meal?"

"We got a grill." He waved a hand at the yellowed menu posted above the bar. "If you got the money," he added.

I always had the money, although most Queen's Hotels preferred a credit card these days. I wondered if I'd ever get one. I opened the guitar case and produced the wad of bills from the little box built in to support the neck of the guitar and hold spare picks and strings.

"Not too bright a place to carry your cash," the bartender commented. "Parking out back," he added as he handed me the key. I didn't tell him I didn't have a car.

Upstairs I put the guitar beside the bed, took off my jacket, and washed my face and hands before I realized there were no towels.

The window looked out over the parking lot. No van there that might belong to the Buck's Crossing Boys, but as I knew well enough, members of a band might travel separately. I'd been picked up by one once, on his way to meet the rest of his band at the Queen's Hotel. That had been summer, the shadows of trees lengthening across green fields and pastures, gold light between.

I picked up my jacket and went down to the bar. There were a few more people there now, and a waitress. "You with the band?" she asked as she set my burger in front of me.

"No," I said, paid up front, removed the slice of tomato and set it to one side of the plate. I hate tomatoes. It wasn't a bad burger. Then I slung on the jacket, turned the collar up against the wind, and went out. I walked down the highway, away from the hotel, until sidewalk became shoulder. The cars had their headlights on now. I was walking with the traffic, and as cars approached, my shadow would appear, lengthen along the shoulder, then vanish .. appear lengthen . vanish.

With the next appearance of my shadow I pivoted and stuck out my thumb. Just to see what would happen.

He didn't even slow down. Neither did the next one. But the third one braked and pulled up on the shoulder ahead of me.

"Where you headed?" the driver asked.

"Toronto," I said.

He laughed. "You're on the wrong side of the road, pal," he said, and drove off.

I crossed the road and put out my thumb for the next car.

"Only going as far as the Queen's Hotel," the driver said.

I'd known that. But I had to try.

"That'll have to do," I said.

Still no van in the parking lot.

The bar was filling up. I went on up the stairs.

The waitress had the guitar case up on the bed, open.

She jumped. "I just wanted to look," she said. "I used to play a little."

"Didn't everyone," I said. She slammed out the door, leaving the towels she'd brought on the bed next to the guitar.

The guitar was on the gold plush lining like—like what? Like a jewel. Like a sword. Like the kind of guitar that makes a top-of-the-line Martin look like a bottom of the line Kay.

The first time I'd seen it had been in the back of an off-pink Studebaker Lark convertible. I'd had to get into the back seat, because the guitar in its case took up the passenger seat.

"Must be some guitar," I'd commented.

"Custom-made," the driver said. "Made to be played. Made for each other, we were. She *wants* to be played, this lady." He patted the guitar case like it was his girlfriend's ass. "You should have heard us working the crowds today."

"Oh yeah?"

"Street festival in London. First time together, I only picked her up from the shop yesterday. We did so well I had to get a vendor to change our take to bills or I'd have broken my arm carrying it."

"Been better to take it to the bank," I said.

"Didn't have time, have a gig with my band tonight. Wait'll they see this baby. Meeting them at the Queen's Hotel, in some little burg just up the road. There's always a Queen's Hotel, ever noticed that?"

I couldn't say that I had. Not then. "I play a little. Mind if I look?"

I could see he was torn between protecting his true love and showing her off. Pride won. "Go ahead," he said. "But be careful."

I pulled the case carefully over the front seat into the back and onto my lap, undid the latches, and lifted the lid.

It practically glowed, gold-on-gold, a broad-bellied acoustic, the spruce top gleaming, no decorations except a line of mother-of-pearl around the soundhole and pickguard, mother-of-pearl position markers, and initials, also of mother-of-pearl, inlaid on the head. I carefully brushed my thumb across the strings, and a deep mellow chord resonated with the humming wheels of the car. I lifted the neck. The tuning pegs were mother-of-pearl too, but that wasn't what I was looking at. Right where I'd guessed it would be. My need's greater than yours, brother, I'd thought.

Then, the spruce top had been a deep, glowing gold. The varnish had darkened over the years until now it was almost red.

Here in a room in a Queen's Hotel I once again brushed my thumb over the strings before setting it upright on the chair. Then I moved the case off the bed and stretched myself out on top of the covers.

I missed the sound of the van coming into the parking lot below, but I was expecting the knock on the door.

"It's open," I said.

Once I'd tried locking the door. That's a night I don't like to remember.

The bartender opened the door.

"The guitar player hasn't shown up," I said, without bothering to get up.

"How'd you know?"

"Maybe it's the guy holding the fiddle standing behind you," I said.

The fiddler was a young, skinny guy, jeans and sweatshirt—nobody dressed up to play, these days—ponytail down his back, beginnings of a scraggly beard. That wouldn't last long, fiddlers have a real problem with ingrown beard hairs. I've picked up a hell of a lot of useless bits of information like that.

"Look," the fiddler said. "We need a guitar player. Ours just called to say his car broke down and he doesn't know if he'll get here at all."

SECRETS

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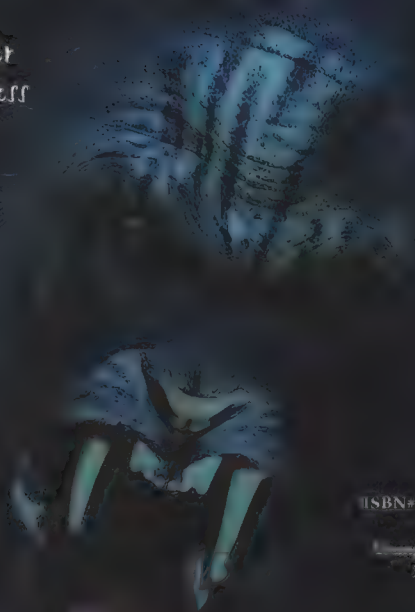

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"We got a crowd. They came to hear the band," the bartender added

"I don't play," I said. I don't know why I still say that. Of course, sometimes it's true

"Tell me another one," said the fiddler. He put down his fiddle and picked up the guitar, fingered a G progression, strumming almost reverently. He put down the guitar and pulled a grubby piece of paper out of his pocket. "Here's the set lists."

I swung myself up, took the paper, read it over. "Hang Me." "Black Mountain Rag." "Little Birdie." "Duncan and Brady." "In the Jailhouse Now." That kind of band

"What's this 'Ashokan Farewell'?"

"How can you not know that one? Everyone expects it, even if the TV series was—"

"I don't watch TV," I said

"Never mind. It's all the easy keys, G, D, C, A, one-four-five, some minor. Don't tell me you can't do that. We'll call it for you. If there's something you'd like to do solo—"

I shook my head.

"What's your name?"

"Van Dyke," I told him. It's not, but it doesn't matter

I wondered, as I put the guitar in its case, picked it up, and followed him down the stairs, what would happen this time. Sometimes I played too well. Sometimes I couldn't play at all. Sometimes .

The bar was full and the natives were restless. As the fiddler and I walked through the door there was a brief lull, like a breeze that blows the waves flat as it passes over a pond, then a renewed stir. The waitress was moving among the tables with a tray of beers. The fiddler stepped up onto the platform and I followed and took the guitar out of its case and checked

the tuning against the mandolin, bass, and banjo—*that* kind of band—while the fiddler adjusted his mike.

"You folks have been very patient," he said. "Unfortunately, our guitar player ran into some trouble—" The mandolinist plucked the first few bars of the chorus of "He's in the Jailhouse Now," to scattered laughter. "But, fortunately, we have a guest who's offered to fill in. Give Mr. Van Dyke a big hand."

They clapped, and I lifted the guitar, and the varnish glowed in the dim light like old blood.

The waitress, tray empty now, had paused at the back of the room, watching. The fiddler swung into "Black Mountain Rag."

Would I be able to play? I never knew. It might want to get even for that little trick I'd tried to play on it, out on the highway. Like the first time. It had really been angry, that first time. I wouldn't have believed that even hicks still have access to rotten eggs, but they do, and of course there's always tomatoes. I hate tomatoes

The others took their instrumentals, one after the other. The fiddler looked at me, and I nodded and took one too, and earned my share of the applause. This might not be a bad night after all. I followed them into the second number.

Little birdie, little birdie,
Come sing me your song
Got a short time to stay here,
And a long time to be gone

The waitress was working her way through the crowd with a fresh tray of beers. Every once in a while she looked my way.

Yeah. My way. I might get lucky tonight. It happens, sometimes. I don't know why. Maybe it's because if a guitar wants to be played, it's gotta keep the guitar player happy. This waitress was a little long in the tooth, forty if she was a day, but I wasn't in a position to pick and choose. Besides, how old was I? I'd lost track, a long time ago.

We worked through "Duncan and Brady," "In the Jailhouse Now," naturally dedicated to their missing guitarist, and "Ashokan Farewell," which as far as I could tell was just an old-time waltz tune, but the crowd seemed to think it was something special. Then "The Girl in the Roadside Tavern," and "Ornie Wise," finishing the set with "The Old Crossroads Is A-Waitin'."—the usual staples for that kind of band—lust, murder, and repentance.

Had I been repentant? Terrified—I remembered *that*. For just an instance I could see him, crushed by the car as it rolled—no seatbelts and roll bars, back then.

I'd been flung over the side and into a soft spot at the bottom of the ditch. I couldn't see the car that screeched to a halt above, or whoever it was who said, "Dear God!" And I guess he couldn't see me either, because he said to someone else, "There's a farmhouse just back a little. We can call from there." "You gonna stay?" someone else said, and the first guy answered, "Not much point. Look at him." "I'd rather not . . . "

The car doors slammed, the car pulled away. I pulled myself to my knees. I was stunned and bruised and dirty, but nothing was broken. I could see the driver now. He lay just off the shoulder. His limbs sprawled at unnatural angles, his face was abraded by gravel, blood and brains oozed from the side of his head, and parts of him were a funny shape where the car

I staggered to my feet and felt in my pocket.
The money was gone
I could hear sirens
I looked around. No scattered bills.
The sirens were closer.

God knows taking the guitar was the last thing on my mind. An easily identified instrument like that? I'd never dare try to sell it. As for playing it, I did play a little. Only a little.

But there it was, safe and sound in its hard-shell case. And it had ideas of its own. It? He? She? It

One road leads to destruction.

The waitress was working her way through the crowd with a fresh tray of beers. Every once in a while she looked my way.

To be other to the pearly gates

The bass played a long drawn-out tag line--down-down-down—and the set was over.

Except one thing I'd learned. It was never over until it was over, and then there was always the next time. We still had another set to play.

Still, there was the waitress, and she was bringing beer. Passing one table, then another, despite signals for refills, closer and closer to the stage. I pretended to tune the guitar, but I was keeping one eye on the waitress and I was as sure as I could be that one of those beers was for me. And it needn't be from her, either. There was a gaggle of unaccompanied girls at the bar, there to pick up a night with one of the band, maybe, and maybe one of them had laid down the cash and told the waitress

But the big guy at the table just beside the stage was hauling out his wallet and counting out the price of two beers plus tip, damn

The contents of both mugs, one after the other, hit me in the face, soaked my shirt, splashed on the guitar, and dripped from the strings

"Hey!" the big guy yelled. "That's mine!" I yelled too, practically in chorus with him and grabbed for anything to wipe the beer from the guitar, "What the hell'd you do that for?"

"You son-of-a-bitch! Where'd you get that guitar? Tell me! Where'd you get that fucking guitar?" She was all over me, trying to rip it away from me. "That's my brother's guitar, you son-of-a-bitch. Those are his initials on the head. I was the first one he ever

Continued on page 84

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at the Top of the BLACK STAIRS

BY DARRELL SCHWEITZER
ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL LEE

Which is more powerful, death or time? Does it even really matter in the end?

IT WAS A STIRRING OF DUST THAT ROUSED KING Vardabates from the sleep of death. He was himself but dust then, oblivious in the Land Beneath the World, but a voice seemed to blow upon the dust, like breath, and the voice spoke his name and bade him come forth, and he had neither strength nor will to resist. So, as if a faint breeze had stirred on a hot, still summer's day (although the Land Beneath the World is cold), the dust rose into the air, less substantial than smoke, but assuming a shape.

King Vardabates awoke from the featureless dream of oblivion into the new dream of memory. He did not recall, at first, that he had ever worn a crown or commanded armies, nor did he remember the splendor of his processions or the magnificence of his many-tiered and many-towered palace, which stood in Bersion, beyond the Delmmean Sea.

No, the first thing he saw in his recoalescing mind was a sunrise glimpsed through the window when he was an infant. Then there was the feel of hot stones beneath his bare feet when he ventured out into a courtyard in the sun and was scolded by his nurse for being dirty.

He took a step forward and drifted like a cloud of dust in the stale air of the Land Beneath the World.

Still the voice called out to him, not in any language the king had spoken in life but in the universal speech of the dead, saying with great urgency, "Arise, Vardabates, King arise!"

His motion over the flat, gray plains left a kind of track not in the dust itself, but in the memories of ghosts, disturbed by his passage, like the vapors of a cloud that has been dispersed coming together again. These others reached up to touch him insubstantial as he might be, that they might cling to something less ethereal than themselves and whisper their own memories, that those memories might not be utterly forgotten: names, a song, a storm at sea, a night of love or rage, the terror of battle, the relief and joy of homecoming.

The eyes of Vardabates opened, and he gazed across the featureless, bonelike landscape and up at the gray sky and the few pale stars. He called to mind another sky, far darker, velvet-black rather than smoke-gray, and other stars, vivid and brilliant where these few were like guttering embers.

By the time he reached the base of that vast, black tower that connects the land Beneath the World to the World itself, he was able to touch the cold stone and feel it, to place his foot upon the first of the black stone steps within and rise to the second. All around him a wind whispered and whistled down from far above, the voices of the newly dead, pouring down out of the World, shouting out the last of their sorrows and rage. King Vardabates heard among the babble of voices some speech he recognized, from his own country, the kind of speech he had heard in life.

Yet he made no answer.

Again, the soft but insistent *other* voice urged him on, in the language of the dead, saying, "Vardabates, come." He found the strength to push against the wind within the tower, like a swimmer against a current. He rose up, up, and around as the stairway spiraled. The name *Urcilak* echoed in his mind like the sound of a gong, for all he could not discover its meaning or significance. It was like trying to capture dust in one's grasping hands.

He struggled on.

It was only as he reached the top of the black stairs, with the wind of descending spirits swirling around his knees as if he were wading in a stream, that he knew *who* he was. He remembered his crown and the armies he had once commanded, and there came to him another name, *Adrathemne,* whom he had loved.

He stood on the threshold before a low, vaulted room at the top of the tower, where two shrouded figures sat at table playing a game on a board. He saw that both were skeletal and pale, that there was only dread in their features, and he knew that these two were Time and Death. Yet, because they were engrossed in their game and had set aside the accoutrements of their offices—a scythe leaned against the wall and an hourglass and a sack of seed rested on a window ledge—he could not tell which was which.

Because he had been, because he *was* a king who had led armies in war, he boldly approached to observe their game.

On the board were playing pieces carved of bone into ships or castles or cities, or even in the shapes of individual men and women. One of the players held what might have been a king in his thin hand, in the midst of a long pause.

At first King Vardabates thought to merely slip past these two, occupied as they were, and escape out the door behind them as a truant child might, but he knew that he was a *king* now, and kings have honor and should not be sneaks.

When he spoke up, groping in the tongue of living men, he could not quite find the words. He felt almost as a child again, inarticulately explaining himself before two powerful masters who were not inclined to hear him out.

"I am ... I have to get by. I'm summoned ... Someone *knows my name*"

One of the figures turned toward him, its face pale and pitted, yet gleaming like a newly risen moon. It leaned down and whispered into his ear. "We know. Go, and take our message into the world of living men. Promise to deliver it and we will let you pass." And this one whispered the message at some length into the king's ear, and in the hearing of it King Vardabates came much closer to actually being alive, for he was made *afraid.*

But he gave his word that he would deliver it.

He hurried from the room, out the door, and climbed *up* that long, dark, well-worn slope down which the souls of the dead come streaming before they reach the black tower. Again, he struggled against a torrent. Countless voices shouted all around him and hands clutched at him, trying to drag him back downhill, outraged that he should be able to defy the order of things and return where they could not.

As his feet found purchase in that hillside and he leaned into the raging wind, it seemed that he came together, bone unto his bone, the dry earth clinging to his bones to form his flesh. Yet there was no breath in him, and he was not alive, though more substantial now, he made his way to the edge of the stone wall that guards the borderlands of the World.

His hands caught hold of the edge of the wall, scraping.

At once an alarm sounded, and borderers came racing to confront him, priest-warriors in armor painted with sigils, whose sacred task it was to drive back such invaders as himself, that the dreams of men might be untroubled by things from out of the realm of the dead.

Yet when he had climbed over the wall and uttered just a few syllables of the message he had been given (by Time or Death, one or the other, he knew not which), the borderers fell in behind him and became his honor guard. Thus King Vardabates marched by moonlight, beneath a dark sky and brilliant stars, barely visible, like a gleam off polished metal glimpsed through the corner of the eye, his footsteps silent.

Yet he stirred the dust of the roads along which he marched. The borderers marched too, behind him, in silence, though their armor clinked and clattered as they passed.

From this apparition, prophets crouched on pillars along the roadside prophesied doom or the return of glorious things, depending on their nature and wont; and the king remembered, not the names of ghosts, but one name, *Adrathemne,* whom he had loved, and another, *Urcilak,* whom he did not.

He felt the road beneath his feet now, and the night air on his face, and when the procession reached the river Arrax, he heard the waters laughing. He heard, too, the shouts and songs of the boatmen on the river.

A ferryman, terrified, conveyed them all to the other side in his barge. They passed through villages and towns. People saw them and cried out, or turned away and ran to their prophets, to know the meaning of this prodigy.

In the light of dawn, the king was harder to see, but not invisible. Throughout the day, his shape was as a wisp of dust hung in the air by a trick of the wind, but still it was there, like something glimpsed dimly out of the corner of the eye. The borderers could not quite remember why they had deserted their posts or where they were bound, though still they marched, compelled by the force of the few syllables the king had spoken to them.

Then evening came, the moon rose, and King Vardabates strode among them, a mighty figure in gleaming armor and splendid raiment, grown stronger from the touch of the earth and the mist from the river and the passing dreams of living men (which he had troubled). Now the shore of the Delamnean Sea spread out before them, and the risen moon gleamed upon the waters, making a road of light across the water. King Vardabates crossed the sea in a mighty war galley ablaze with lights, with all his entourage (including many witches, who had joined him as their souls roamed abroad, drawn along with the procession like leaves in a strong current of wind). They had come to Bersion, the immense palace of the great kings, which gleamed like a sudden, impossible sunrise in the midst of the night. (Many-tiered and many-towered it was, and filled with light, and carved, so men said, out of a single piece of white marble around which the whole world formed even as silt gathers around a boulder in a stream). Now the gates of that palace gaped wide, and the galley sailed into the harbor within. Above, higher and higher as they blended with the stars, the battlements and towers of Bersion gleamed in the night, until even King Vardabates and his entourage and the thousands of richly-robed and plumed courtiers who had

come to greet him seemed as mites of some kind, insects crawling on the floor of a vast, luminous cavern

Dragons, curled and resting in the battlements, gazed down on the scene with lazy indifference, though it was a splendid sight

One last time the voice that had summoned him touched the king's ear, saying, "Vardabates, come."

The king answered, "I have come."

And he and the borderers and others of his entourage, and the thousand courtiers who had come to greet him, accompanied by drummers drumming and trumpeters blaring away, processed into the palace which had once been his. All of them flowed like a river, like a tide, like the storm-wind which is the breath of Fate (or Time, or of the gods)

Memories poured back into the king's mind.

He saw everything clearly now, his entire past returned, like words in a book opened again after a long time and read anew. He remembered all his conquests and triumphs, all the treasures he had amassed. It seemed, as he ascended a golden dais, put on again his gorgeous robe of state, and sat upon his throne with scepter in one hand and the globe of kingship in the other, that the Golden Age had returned and the mightiest king of all had reclaimed his glory, that Death itself had been defeated.

And the trumpeters blasted the news of this to the stars, into the very ears of the gods

The dragons, disturbed in their rest among the rooftops, fluttered off into the night.

And the king sat in silence, trembling, as if afraid to speak.

The courtiers, too, were silent, in amazement.

For King Vardabates had been a harsh man when living, had spilled seas of blood in the course of his conquests and the amassing of his treasure. Dreadful had he been to his foes, like a thundebolt. He feared nothing. No one had ever seen him tremble.

But in one terrible instant, as his mind and memory were fully reestablished, King Vardabates understood *exactly* what had happened, how he had come to be summoned back from the sleep of oblivion, and the circumstances leading up to his own death

The revelation was as the thunderbolt, a searing blast, then an echo that went on and on.

He understood that his queen, who was not named Adrathemne but whom he did not love, was a cold-hearted woman who loved only power and schemed against all. It was Queen *Buran* who had conspired with her chief counselor, *Urcilak*, the sorcerer, to poison the king; and it was *Buran* who set the tiny, silver serpent wriggling into his ear as he slept in his garden and laughed softly as the serpent troubled his dreams, boasting of her infidelity as it gnawed away at his brain

But it was neither the sorcerer nor the queen who called him back. The guilty pair stood beside the throne, aghast, unable to gaze upon him or each other

No, it had been his beloved *Adrathemne*, his daughter, whom Queen Buran had given to an evil courtier, who had raped and defiled her, murdered her children for sorcery, and locked her up in a tomb

It was *she* who had despaired, *she* who defiled her soul even as her body was defiled, giving herself over to the pleasure of demons, and become a sorcerer thereby, *she* who had called him back, even as she had clawed her way out of her tomb and now approached the throne, barefoot, bloody, and in rags, her eyes wild with madness, yearning for justice and revenge and that her father might take her in his arms again and love her as a father loves a small child

The great mass of glittering-robed courtiers parted before her like a sea

And King Vardabates shook his head sadly, as if to say merely, *Too late. Too late*

He could only deliver the message that had been given to him at the top of the black stairs. He was bound by honor to do so.

It was, in any case, far too late to do anything else.

He opened his mouth, and breathed out something like impossibly ethereal black dust, which no man could touch or smell or wipe off the surface of a glass, but which dimmed the blazing lights and muted the trumpets.

He spoke the message in the language of the dead, whether a single word or perhaps a short phrase or a recitation that extends like the echo of a shimmering gong to the very limits of eternity without ever being complete, none can say, for it was a message which may be only heard once, and never repeated

To the queen, its meaning was that her beauty and majesty left her at once, and she went away to live for many years alone in a cell of her own choosing, until she was but a withered husk, unable to recall her name or her crimes, yet finding no release

To Urcilak, the wicked counselor, the message (whether of Time or Death) commanded that before he went completely mad from terror, he should direct that his own soul be captured in a bottle (as often sorcerers capture souls, to gain power over them) and hurled into the sea; though even that would gain him no release from timeless, deathless nightmares.

And the witches who had accompanied the king this far now scattered like frightened starlings.

To the king's daughter, who stood before him, the message whispered gently, *Comfort, child, for one will soon relieve you of all your sorrows*, meaning either that Death would claim her or that Time, sowing years upon her from out of his bag of seed, would take away her pain

In that single utterance the king encompassed all the greatness of the realm and all he had achieved, and the black dust from his mouth covered the moon and shut out the stars. Darkness now settled upon the fields of the land, killing cattle and smothering the children of every household. Still the message echoed until the rivers silted up with dust and even the Delmmnean Sea withdrew far from Bersion, until each courtier saw that his own splendid robes were but moldy cerements, and that all ambitions would be worn away by Time as the wind polishes a carved stone face smooth again. To poets, the word was silence, to the prophets (according to their inclination and wont) came news of great terror or of the ending of days.

Still the darkness poured out of the king's mouth and the souls of the numberless dead streamed away from his throne, swirling out of the palace, down steps and out of windows, from off the battlements, streaming across the empty lands to froth like a tide over the wall that guards the frontier of the world; thence down, down the well-worn slope and through the door of the black tower, swirling again around the ankles of the two who sat at the table engrossed in their game before plunging, at last, whimpering, their voices fading to a susurrus of wind, *down* the black, twisting stairway up which King Vardabates had ever returned

And the echo of the king's speech reverberated until the great palace was wiped smooth, like the pure stone it was before the beginning of the world. He sat on his throne in the heart of that great stone, troubling the dreams of men, yet forgotten alike by history, legend, myth, and even the very gods. All this while they had stared down vacuously from behind the screen of stars in the night sky, uncertain of what perturbed them; and they raised not their hands, nor spoke, for even the gods could not defy the one who had given King Vardabates the message and even they dreaded to hear it.

They knew it would reach them eventually

At the very last, to King Vardabates himself, the message said nothing at all. It supplanted and erased all his own memories, all his loves and hates, all he had ever treasured or feared, even that moment on the hot stones before the nurse scolded him for being dirty.

A single tear formed and streamed slowly down the king's cheek

And in the black tower, at the top of the stairs, the player who had held his piece amid a pause for so long (whether Time or Death, none can say) made a sudden move and cried out, "Ha! The victory is mine!" ❧

Take a dead wolf, a gorgeous dame, and a hardbitten multidimensional detective and you've got trouble that won't quit. Pull up a stool and pour yourself a double.

DEAD WOLF mAn hAt

By Graham Edwards
Illustration by Ken Myer, Jr.

The man in the hat burst through my office door, closely followed by the bullet that killed him.

Don't you just hate that?

Me, I kept my feet up on the desk. Sometimes it just doesn't do to move too fast. All the same, even before the big guy hit the floor I was reaching for the desk holster. I didn't release it though, not yet. I just held my finger over the lever and stared out the open door into the rain.

It's hard to see much through the rain. Of course, it's always raining here, which is why I never use the door. There's more than one way in and out of this office. It's ten years now since I took over the business and I've already found eighty-nine exits. I figure that's around half. I use whichever one suits the case. The door I leave to the clients.

So there I was, feet on top of the desk, fingers itching underneath it, with rain lashing in and a man with a hat on breathing his last on the floor. I kept one eye on the rain and flicked the other toward my visitor.

"You all right, buddy?" I said

What came out of the guy's mouth was muffled, on account of his face being buried in the carpet. But I did catch two words. '*hilfe* ..' and '.. *knock*

Another bullet cut through the rain. Whining like a mosquito, it struck the steel sole of my left shoe and ricocheted into the coffee-machine. Like I said, it doesn't always do to move too fast.

With a shriek, the machine shattered, spraying hot coffee up the wall. I ground my teeth in fury—that coffee machine and I went back a long, long way. But still I didn't move.

I let the next four bullets hit my feet before pulling the lever. The desk holster launched the little pistol into my hand. *Then* I moved.

ROLLING OFF THE CHAIR, I jumped the man in the hat and shouldered the door shut. Just in time: The invisible shooter had already reloaded. Six fresh bullets bounced off the glass, just below my nameplate. I told the door to stay shut, no matter what, and heard the satisfying clicking sounds as it deadbolted itself into the door.

Knowing I was safe, I knelt down beside my visitor. The carpet he'd burned his face in was now soaked in blood and rainwater Each time he breathed out he made little red bubbles. He made three more bubbles before giving up for good

Great Now I had a corpse on my hands, my office was a crime scene, and I had to get my carpet cleaned—again

And things just kept getting better

I was about to roll the stiff onto his back, so as to get a good look at his face, when he started to twitch *Undead*, I thought at once. It was the obvious conclusion. Feeling in need of a little extra protection, I tucked the pistol into my shoulder holster and grabbed my coat off the wall. Some folk might think it odd that a guy like me should turn to his coat in times of trial but, trust me that coat and I go back even further than the coffee machine.

I turned the coat inside out four times until its lining was made of titanium (chain-links, herringbone weave) and put it on.

When I turned back to look at the dead man in the hat, he was already halfway through changing into a wolf

OK a word about werewolves You've seen it all before. We all have. Feet stretching out to become enormous paws, fur exploding everywhere. Huge great fanged muzzle punching out from inside the guy's jaw all accompanied by a sound like a championship knuckle-cracking team making popcorn in .. fireworks factory

Yeah, there was all that—there always is—but what most folk don't realize is that there's this weird kind of *beauty* to it all. No really, trust me, there is.

It roots me to the spot is what I'm trying to say Always has done. Seeing a body change like that whether it's alive or dead, is like getting a glimpse of something you're not meant to see Not that I want to get all sappy about it it just gets to me you know?

The thing is it's not like it's really the body that's doing the changing It's like the body is *being changed from outside* Like there's this invisible sculptor picking things up and molding them into something else, rearranging them, whittling them like soft wood, and pressing them like warm clay, only it's happening inside as well as outside. But, get this: It's *gentle*. The noise is moderately alarming, no question, but to look at ... it's like poetry And whenever I'm privileged enough to witness it, I get to thinking about who that sculptor might be, and where he might be, and what else he might get up to in his spare time

Enough already. The changeover routine got to me a little, that's all you need to know. I stood like a tree while the dead guy in a hat turned into a dead wolf in a hat When it was over, I snapped myself out of it and went over to examine the remolded corpse

The first thing I did was check the beast's pulse The last thing I wanted in my office was a ten-foot werewolf with eight-inch canines waking up and deciding lunch was served. I held my breath until I was happy the werewolf didn't have any of its own left to hold, then I set about working out what pack it belonged to.

They all belong to a pack, you see. Like a clan—it's a family thing. There are hundreds of packs scattered, mostly across Europe, although there's a big cluster in Siberia too. Each pack has its own badge. The badges are a kind of uniform, but they have a more important function: Without its badge, a werewolf can't change.

Another little-known fact here.

A werewolf needs the full moon to change, sure, but it also needs its badge Without the badge, no cracking bones, no explosion of fur, no mystical sculptor doing the muzzle-stretch thing. Oh, and while I'm revealing trade secrets, I'll bet you didn't know that a werewolf is not a human who turns into a wolf. It's the other way 'round. So, when they die, it's different to what most folk expect. The old cliché of the werewolf melting back to human form *the* instant it's killed is all backwards. If you don't believe me, just remember what happened to the man in the hat when he finally breathed his last red bubble on my office carpet

So pack badges They vary There's the *Halskettewolfen* pack, for example. They have to put on a gold necklace before they can change (they're closely related to the infamous *Bozenwolfen*, who use special belts). In Italy you have the *Lupo-guanto* with their metal gloves, in England the cravat-wearing *Tyedogs*, in Spain the *Lobolengua*, who can only change their form when they put in these crazy tongue-piercings That's just grotesque, if you ask me

I set to work trying to identify the wolf on my floor.

The words the man had spoken before he died had sounded German, and even through the carpet I knew I'd heard an eastern Bavarian accent Which narrowed it down to three My visitor was either a *Ringhund*, a *Glasswegewolf* or a *Knopfwolf* I checked there were no rings on any of the beast's paws and both its eyes looked natural enough *Knopfwolf*, then

I checked every Button on that damned beast -trenchcoat cuffs and, yes, even its fly—and every single one came up blank Not a *Knopfwolf* then

I sat back, careful to avoid the red stain on the floor, and scratched my head Then I had an idea

I took the pin off the dead w lf's head looked inside the lining and saw he or she was of a werewolf pack I'd never heard of in my life The *Helmwolf Bruderschaft*

I've had many strange visitors come out of the rain and into my office but never a werewolf in a hat

I took time out then to clear up the mess the shooter had made of my coffee machine It wasn't as bad as I'd thought The glass jug was history but the rest of the workings looked in good shape The coffee had stripped the paint where it splattered up the wall but I'd never really liked that wall in the first place. And at least now it looked like the other walls. Some folk call my office shabby, me, I call it my office

"You'll be OK, buddy," I whispered to the coffee machine as I set it straight on the filing cabinet again. "New jug, fresh grounds, you'll be right as rain in no time."

It burped wearily and I turned my attention back to the dead werewolf.

"Okay, buddy," I said to the corpse "Some questions One What brought you through my door? Two. Who shot you and why? Three. *Hilfe* I understand—that means *help*, but what did you want to knock? Four. Why have I never heard of the *Helmwolfen*?"

In truth, I was feeling rattled. I'd thought I knew everything there was to know about werewolves Call it pride if you like—I just call it knowing my trade. Not knowing about the *Helmwolfen* bugged me even more than having a corpse on my floor so, even though I knew I should be calling the cops, I did the next best thing. I started looking through the Big Dictionary.

All the books on my shelf are for show except one: the Big Dictionary *Naked Singularities and Their Application to the Law* I

know by heart and *Self-Defense in Dimensionally Unstable Environments* is just for beginners You'll occasionally catch me leafing through *What to Look for in a Femme Fatale* but, if I'm honest, that's only for the pictures But the Big Dictionary ... well, it's my Bible

I cracked the spine backwards until the cover read *V to X*, then turned it to *W*. All the werewolf packs were listed alphabetically but, surprise surprise, no mention of the *Helmfwolfen*. The list went straight from *Hatchet-wolf* to *Hosenbund* without taking a breath

Soon I heard a rumbling sound, more metallic than the throat clearing, twice as loud and getting louder all the time The wind gusted, blasting into me from the same direction as the approaching smear of light. Then I heard a whistle, long and gluttinous, and suddenly it was on me, an immense iron lobster with two hundred wheels, all interconnected with rods and dripping sinews and sprung cables and grinding cylinders. Brakes engaged and the mammoth train screeched to a halt Steam erupted from a thousand greasy sphincters, oil oozed through toothsome grilles, chains with

The thermometer dangling outside the cab read ten degrees shy of absolute zero.

I closed the book and cracked the spine again until it was an atlas A quick scan of Bavaria gave me no clues, so I closed and cracked it a third time until it was a history of shapeshifters Still nothing

I sighed, put the Big Dictionary back on the shelf and went to pick up the phone. What I saw outside my office door stopped me in my tracks

It was a *femme* and she sure was looking *fatale*

She was tall—tall enough so I'd have had to stand on a box to meet her eye A long, white sweater, soaked through by the rain, clung to her curves all the way down to her knees Beneath it there was anything other than her Water on the glass obscured her face One hand was perched on her hip the other was holding a handgun—a big one—up against the door As I watched, she fired a bullet at point-blank range into the glass

The door rang like a bell and I saw the bullet ricochet carving a thin trail of vapor through the rain. It missed the dame's left ear by an inch maybe two

"Hey, now," I began Then she fired again

This time, when the bullet ricocheted, it took a chunk out of the sidewalk It also took a chunk out of the glass

"Hey," I said again, "what's with the "

Another bullet Another sliver of glass

The dame fired four more bullets, reloaded quickly and calmly, then started firing again

The door was tough enough to take this kind of punishment for a while, but not forever. I shot a glance at the filing cabinet—I have my own arsenal of weapons in the second drawer up—but something made me slide my gaze up to the drawer above.

Another bullet hit the door, then she wiped the glass clean and peered inside, showing me her face for the first time As a rule I don't gasp. Not unless somebody gives me good reason She did.

"Of all the dames!" I gasped "It had to be you."

I picked up the hat Then, without thinking, I strode over to the filing cabinet and did something I hadn't done for nearly ten years. I opened the top drawer, folded myself in half, and fell inside.

It was just as bad as I remembered

I was falling through dark, bitter air. Icy winds tried to grab me with angry fingers Way in the distance I could see flashes of what looked like lightning, but what sounded like a giant clearing its throat

I fell like this for what felt like a day During that time I only blinked my eyes once

Then, slowly, something began to materialize out of the gloom: a pair of parallel silver lines, writhing like two snakes that had been shackled together but hated each other's guts They weren't snakes, of course; they were railroad tracks

The tracks came closer. The lightning still flashed, but now there was another light smearing its way toward me. It was centered on the tracks and followed their jitterbug routine like it was glued to them. Which, in a way, it was

links as thick as my arm cracked like whips and flaming coals spilled from a great brazier perched high behind the tunnel, half a mile above my head

And there I stood, just as amazed and daunted as I had been the first and last time, before the Search Engine

There was a sudden movement, midway up, right behind the boiler Something emerged a little like a head a little like a shadow

"You comin' up?" The voice rolled down to me like syrup, with an afterbite of cheap Bourbon

A ladder made from what looked like human thigh bones rattled down in its wake Reluctantly, I started to climb

I need to find something," I shouted when I was nearly at the top

"Don't they all!" screamed the shadow inside the great cylindrical boiler, something crashed like an ocean liner piercing an iceberg.

The Search Engine started to move again, quickly, all at once The ladder was hurled backward; grimly I clung on, crawling hand-over-hand along the last few rungs until something like a claw grabbed my shoulder and hauled me inside the cab

The thermometer dangling outside the cab read ten degrees shy of absolute zero. I watched as a tiny bird made from cosmic string perched briefly on the bracket before darting off into the void. Inside the cab it was hot as a furnace

THE DRIVER TURNED TO ME and spoke with something like a mouth.

"So, pilgrim, what ya searchin' for?"

I shivered. If I'd stuck the thermometer into that voice the mercury would have dropped another six degrees.

I held up the hat.

"I need to know where this came from," I said, working hard to keep my voice level. I am a professional, after all.

The driver threw me something like a grin and bore down on a lever the size of a small crane The Search Engine barreled left, toward a nearby darkness

"That everything ya want to know, pilgrim?" shouted the driver, standing suddenly tall on something like legs With a mighty inhalation the Search Engine plunged into the blackness of the Tunnel of All Ends

Okay, so I'd seen the dame before. We went back a long way, she and I. Not as far as the coffee machine, and she couldn't even compete with the filing cabinet. But it was a long way, all the same

It was seven years ago she first walked into my office Same curves, different sweater She must have seen the look on my face because the first thing she'd done was flash me the ring on her left hand, warning me off. But she'd also flashed me her legs when she

sat down. And all through the conversation her eyes had bored into mine. Sometimes you just know you know?

The case had been simple enough. Her husband, who'd spent most of their marriage using her as a punching bag, had gotten himself locked away for his part in one of the biggest vault heists this side of the River Lethe. I knew his gang—everyone in the business did. They'd knocked off a score of places before finally coming unstuck at the Silverlode. The Silverlode is just the other side of the street from the Still Point of the Turning World, which is why they wanted to get into it so bad. A haul from the Silverlode is a good enough haul, but nobody's ever broken their way into the S.P.T.W.—I mean *nobody*. This gang figured if they could break into the Silverlode, maybe they could tunnel their way across the street into the S.P.T.W. Nobody knows what they might have come out with if they'd succeeded, but one thing's for certain. They'd have been treated like gods. Well, maybe not gods. Titans, at the very least.

They didn't even make it as far as the end of the street.

All these places are on the Street of Fools and there's not many get past a Fool. No sooner had Cerberus started barking (and barking, and barking) than the tall guy who puts down pennies on the sidewalk sniffed them out and called down the thunder birds. After that, they practically handed themselves in. Cerberus you probably know, but there's not many have heard of the guy with the pennies. I'll tell you about him another time, suffice it to say, if *you* ever see a penny lying on the sidewalk, my advice is to ignore the old rhyme and cross to the other side of the street. Preferably move to another town. Don't, whatever you do, pick it up.

BUT I WAS TELLING YOU about the dame, the getaway driver's wife. He got life in Wulan Pen, naturally, but she told me he'd found a loophole, a way of getting to her on weekends. She couldn't prove anything because it was a temporal loophole, so he always managed to leave her apartment and get back to the Pen fifteen minutes before he'd arrived, which meant he never showed up on any of the security cameras. But the bruises he gave her showed up all right. All the way up her legs, right up to her panties. I never forgot those bruises.

So I staked out the apartment, caught the husband and closed the loophole. Closed the case too. Open and shut, just the way I liked it.

She liked it the same way as me, so we spent the night in the sack. OK, maybe it was unprofessional, but a guy's got needs, right?

Next morning, while she was making chicory coffee, I saw something under the mattress. It looked like a photograph, and here's one thing you should know about me: I'm never off duty. Call it dedication, call it a curse. In this case, call it trouble.

The picture showed the getaway car on the day of the heist. The guy behind the wheel wasn't the husband. It wasn't even a guy. It was the dame.

She came through with the coffee. Saw me with the photo and laughed.

"You can't prove anything," she said.

"You framed your own husband," I replied.

"My alibi's cast-iron."

"What about the photo?"

"A sentimental reminder," she said, drawing a tiny gun from the garter around her right thigh. She wasn't wearing anything else so there was nowhere else she could have hidden a weapon.

The gun held one bullet and she used it to shoot a hole in the photo, right where her face was. I tossed the ruined photo aside through a cloud of gunsmoke and chicory.

"You used me," I said. "Now that loophole's closed your husband's never getting out of there. And you're walking around free as a bird."

"As an eagle," she laughed.

As I brushed past her she pulled me close and kissed me once, brutally.

"See you around, mister," she whispered.

And she did. Most years she came to me with some scam or other. Every time I told myself I wouldn't get involved. Every time I told myself she was a ruthless, heartless dame on the lookout only for herself. And every single time I fell for it. And her.

Except this time.

This time, I told myself, things were going to be different.

The Tunnel of All Ends is the place to go when you want to find something out. Everything's down there, and I mean everything. Everything that ever happens gets recorded and filed away in some or other side alley and it stays there forever. Don't ask me how it works—something to do with a quantum inseparability link to a place called *Stone*—but the paperwork must be catastrophic because *everything's* there, categorized and cross-referenced and waiting to be found. You just have to know where to look.

Which is where the Search Engine comes in. It's ugly and terrifying, but it's fast and it never fails.

Unfortunately, the fare can be on the high side.

"There," said the driver, pointing out a long, shabby passage with something like a finger. At the far end, a tired-looking station platform sagged beneath flickering fluorescents. "Lycanthropia Terminus."

Then the driver turned toward me, brandishing something like a hole punch, but more like a surgical instrument, and said the words I'd dreaded hearing this whole trip. "Tickets please."

By the time I folded myself back out of the filing cabinet, the dame had shot herself a neat, round hole in the door. She was about to reach through the hole to undo the latch. Dropping the hat, I marched over and did it for her. Her fingers brushed mine and our eyes met through the rain-streaked glass. Her lips parted and, so help me, I felt my heart do that familiar high wire plunge.

I pulled away from the door and slumped myself down behind the desk.

"You can let yourself in," I growled.

"I already did," she replied, her voice husky, maybe from the cold, maybe not. "May I sit down?"

I shrugged. "Please yourself. You usually do."

She sat down, smoothing her soaked sweater over her knees. I tried not to watch her doing this, without much success.

"I'll come straight to the point," she began. "This man . . ." she pointed to the corpse on the floor, ". . . I mean, this *creature*, has been blackmailing me."

I kept my eyes fixed on hers. It wasn't hard. "Looks like he just stopped," I said.

"Are you going to turn me in?" She leaned across the desk and

At the far end, a tired-looking station platform sagged beneath the flickering fluorescents.

clasped her hands around mine. Her touch was cold and electric. "Are you?"

"Is that why you shot your way in here? To plead your innocence before I figured it was you?"

"How long would it have taken you to find out?"

I shrugged. "Would have taken me a minute or two to get the slug out of the stuff. As for tracing it—that depends who I went to."

"Give me a for instance."

"Deke the Rip could do it in a half-hour. Twenty minutes to get to his place and back."

"So you'd have been knocking on my door within the hour."

Again I shrugged. "It's what I do."

"You think I don't know that?"

"You know it. So why shoot the werewolf on my doorstep? Why not choose somewhere more discreet? And why was he blackmailing you?"

She pressed her shoulders back in the chair and crossed her legs. Water squeezed from the soaked fabric and puddled beneath the desk. "You're asking a lot of questions—no, you don't need to tell me it's what you do."

I raised my eyebrows. "You got that right. So, you want to answer some of them?"

Lowering her eyes, she began her story.

"I hooked up with him a couple of months ago. He was kind of mysterious and that fascinated me. He only let me see him two nights a week and never at all around the full moon. I suppose I should have guessed his secret but . . . well, with some folk, just being around them makes you blind to the obvious, you know what I mean?"

"Yes, ma'am," I murmured, watching what was left of the rain trickling through her hair. "I know."

"He was big on casinos so we did the strip. He won a lot of dough; he was lucky that way."

"Not so lucky now," I said, eyeing the corpse. "So, why the blackmail, if he was on such a winning streak?"

"Because his luck ran out. He ran himself up a tab he couldn't pay off and got the heavies on his back—I'm talking about the real heavies. He owes a lot of money to a lot of very ugly people I mean owed, I guess."

"The Tartarus Club?" I hazarded. She nodded her head and shuddered. The movement did remarkable things to the curves beneath that damned sweater. "Are you telling me the Titans were after him?"

"Yes. Only I got to him first."

"So what did you have that he wanted?"

"Money, what else? I inherited a packet from my third husband."

"How did *he* die?"

"In tragic circumstances."

"I'll bet."

"Are you cross-examining me?"

"Is that an invitation?"

"Since when did you wait to be invited?"

"Stick to the story, ma'am."

By now her eyes were locked back on mine. That was just the way I liked them.

"I'm a rich widow these days," she went on, 'and that's all you need to know. So, the wolfman got wind of my billions."

"Pardon me—did you say *millions*?"

"No. Now where was I? Oh yes, he found out I was rich and decided I was the one to pay off his debts and buy his ticket out of hell. Only I'd already found out he was cheating on me, so it was no deal. That's when I got the first blackmail note."

"What did he have on you?"

She held my gaze and said quietly. "There were two photos taken that day."

I closed my eyes and all at once I was back in that apartment. Damn it all, I could even smell the gun-smoke and cheap sex.

"Why didn't you destroy all the evidence?" I said. "You were quick enough to shoot a hole in the photo I found. Why *had* she kept the other one at all? Why run the risk?"

I could sense this whole thing was getting out of hand, maybe even getting dangerous. The dame still had a gun in her hand, after all. I knew I had to keep her talking. Besides, I was curious: why had she kept the one piece of evidence that could have put her away for life?

To my astonishment, a tear was spilling from between her perfect black lashes.

"Sentimental reasons," she said. "My first husband—the one they locked away, the one I framed, the one who spent every spare hour of the day beating the bright blue hell out of me . . . I . . ."

"You still love him," I said. "Sweet mother of mercy! Now I've heard it all."

I rocked back in the chair and reminded myself there are two things man was never meant to know: what happened before the Big Bang singularity and why dames do what they do.

"So," I said heavily, "your boyfriend, the werewolf, stole the photo and used it to blackmail you, to pay off his gambling debts."

WIDE, TEAR-FILLED EYES trembled in her pale, cold face as she nodded, her bottom lip trembling.

"It's just a coincidence we were in your neighborhood when I finally got him cornered. And that's the honest truth," she said, her voice breaking.

Rising from my chair, I slammed both fists down on the desk and lunged toward her, my own lips pulled back from my teeth, and with the most ferocious growl I could muster I said, "Liar!"

Her tears stopped abruptly. I held my breath and waited for the gunshot. I wished I'd put my feet up on the desk—that would at least have given me a fighting chance. But no, I faced her down, knowing my only hope was to outstare her.

Only when she looked away did I allow myself to breathe again. How much time had I bought myself? I didn't know. What I did know was I'd knocked her off balance. I had to keep her that way, so I went over to the wolf's corpse and picked up the hat.

"Interesting badge," I said, fingering the lining. "The *Helmwolfen Bruderschaft*. Not a very well-known pack."

"I wouldn't know," she said listlessly. The big handgun lay on her lap; her fingers lay on the big handgun.

"It's not well-known for one very simple reason," I continued. "It isn't a wolf pack at all."

"Isn't it? But I thought all werewolves belonged to packs."

"They do. But our friend here isn't a werewolf."

I whipped off my coat and made ready to turn it inside-out. The intense heat of the Search Engine's cab had prompted me to turn it into comfortable but penetrable sealskin. Right now it was about as bulletproof as a wet paper towel. I was quick, but the dame was quicker. Throwing back the chair, she stood in a lithe, economical movement and pointed the big hand gun right at the centre of my head. Since that's a part of my anatomy I'm particularly fond of, I froze.

"Drop the coat," she hissed.

"It's just a coat."

"Drop it!"

I dropped the coat.

"What do you know?" she snapped.

"I'd never heard of the *Helmwolfen*. There was no mention of any such pack in the Book. But not everything gets into the Big Dictionary," I smiled. "You're not in there, for instance, but you exist all right."

"You can be sure of it. Go on."

"When I dug a bit deeper I discovered there's a secret society called the *Helmwolfen*, but they're not werewolves."

"They're not?"

"No, ma'am, although they move in similar circles. Turns out the *Helmwolfen* are gamblers What they do is kind of weird: they take ordinary articles of clothing and lace them with *lycanthropia* "

"*Lycanthropia*? What's that?" She looked puzzled, but I wasn't convinced the expression was genuine

"Essence-of-werewolf Musk. Distilled hound-juice. Whatever. It's intense stuff, very, very powerful. You don't even want to think about how they get their hands on it Anyway, it does pretty much what a werewolf badge does to its owner "

"What do you mean?"

"Put it this way, you put on an outfit laced with *lycanthropia* and it won't be your own face you see next time you check the mirror "

"It can turn anybody into a werewolf?"

"Not necessarily a wolf. Could be anything Tiger, bear, stoat, you name it It's usually a mammal, usually a carnivore. But not always. There's records of were parrots. One poor bastard turned into a wereshark and suffocated in his own front room."

"So where does the gambling come in?"

"The *Helmwolfen* bet on what the victim—and these *are* victims, make no mistake—will turn into Big money changes hands. It's not a game for the squeamish Were-ism isn't a stable condition. Unless you're born to it, chances are the transformation will only be successful one way "

"One way?"

"Yeah. When you change back, all the different parts of your body go back in the wrong order "

"How do they get the . victims to do it?"

"GAMBLING AGAIN. There are *Helmwolfen* behind most of the big casinos in most of the big towns. Including the Tartarus Club. They see some poor sucker laying down more than he can afford and make him an offer he can't refuse. "Try this game," they say. "Survive, and we'll wipe the slate clean."'

The gun wavered in her hand.

"You're the one who owes the money," I said, seizing the advantage, "aren't you? I'm just telling you what you already know Because the truth is that *you re* the one they made the offer to, not this poor schmuck "

For a moment I didn't know which way she'd tip. Then she collapsed like a bunch of wet noodles into the chair, bent her head to the desk and sobbed her wretched little heart out.

Me, like the poor sap I am, wrapped my arm around her shoulders. Beneath the sodden sweater she felt hot and alive I told myself to keep my mind on the job.

"I'm s-sorry," she wept. "I didn't know w-what else to do I was so d-desperate Can you forgive me?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'll need to get it all straight in my head first. Without a guy like me on the case this could all get mighty confusing."

"You can work it out," she said, touching my cheek with ten thousand volts of fingertip "I know you're the man for the job."

"Okay," I said. "Let me see You start visiting the Tartarus Club, maybe thinking you'll get hooked up with some rich widower, maybe just to kid yourself you still got a life Instead you get hooked on the gaming tables—blackjack's my guess. Am I right so far?"

Sniffling, she nodded.

"So, you run yourself deep into debt. You go to the management, flash them your legs, maybe a little more They decline your offers and make you one of their own. 'Just try this hat on for size,' they tell you. 'We got ourselves a little game going back here Big Japetos thinks you just might be a swan.' 'Can I think about it?' you say. 'Sure,' they say And again, when you ask if you can keep the hat while you chew it over, they say, 'Sure ' Because they know you won't dare get rid of it, for fear of what they'll do to you And you won't dare try it on You'll just stare at it and stare at it until you run back to them screaming to get it over with. Am I still on the right ball here?"

Her eyes had glazed a little and she looked ready to cry again. I felt bad, like I was rubbing her nose in it, but if I was going to help her .

Was I going to help her? Sweet mother of mercy!

"Am I right?" I repeated

"Huh? Oh, yes. On the button."

"So, tell me where you found the dog."

She drew the back of her hand across her mouth, sat up and stared into at the rain "At the pound," she said. "I picked the one that looked most like a wolf—German Shepherd it said on the cage. I told the superintendent I was going to give it a good home, then I brought it here."

"Did you know what would happen when you put the hat on it?"

"No I was guessing. Luckily for me I guessed right "

"Not so lucky for the German Shepherd."

"The hat turned him into a wereman."

"Most dangerous werebeast of all. So it's said "

"I did it in the alley that runs down the side of your office Once the transformation was complete, it was easy enough to herd the wretched creature into your doorway and ... and "

"And shoot it in cold blood at point-blank range "

She buried her face in her hands. "It was just a dog," she sobbed

"Not a werewolf at all," I mused, "but a wereman An Alsatian in a *lycanthropia* hat. Now I've seen it all. All you need to tell me now is why."

"I told you, I was desperate. If I go back to the Titans they'll turn me into something horrible and I'll never get back in one piece If I try to run they'll track me down and kill me anyway You don't know what those Titans are like "

I stopped rubbing her shoulders for a moment An old scar on the back of my hand throbbed suddenly *Remember me*, it seemed to be saying.

"Oh yes," I muttered, "oh yes I do "

"You do?" she looked at me curiously

"Another story," I said. "Another time. You were telling me why you shot the dog."

"So you could get me put away," she said. Then she added, "Could you rub my shoulders again? It feels kind of nice "

Dumbstruck, I obliged

"You?" I said when I could speak again "The woman who framed her own husband to avoid the clink ... and now you're framing yourself!"

"It was the hat that gave me the idea. I sat there staring at it, just like you said, when the idea came to me. If I could commit what looked like a murder on the doorstep of someone I could trust, I could get myself into safe custody before the Titans even got a sniff of what was going on Nobody can touch you once they put you in Wulan Pen, not even the Titans. But only a murder would guarantee me a life sentence. I could never kill anyone, not for real, and that's when I thought up the trick with the dog."

"And when the dead body turned back into a what looked like a wolf, everyone would assume you'd killed a shapeshifter. Even me. Making it, in the eyes of the law, first degree murder "

"I really thought you'd believe the blackmail story," she said sulkily "The whole thing would have worked if you hadn't been so damned keen on following up the clues."

I adopted my best hurt expression

"Ma'am,' I said, 'it's what I do."

Pressing herself into my embrace, she said softly, "Now you know the truth So what are you going to do? Take me back to the Titans? Or turn me over to the cops?"

Her eyes flashed, once, twice, and my heart did the high-wire thing again Then, so help me, I said, "Hold tight, lady. I got a better idea "

We stood beside the dancing railroad tracks: me, the dame and three Titans. Winter wind howled into our flesh Lightning flashed

above us, beneath us, inside our heads. In the far, far distance, a familiar smear of light came galloping out of the gloom.

The great lobster shape of the Search Engine crashed to halt just inches from our faces, spilling its load of noxious gases and lubricants into the noisome filth of its wake. Even the Titans had the good grace to look impressed.

Something like a head emerged from the cab. Following it out, moving with sidewinder speed, came something like a body. This time, instead of inviting us up, the driver was coming down.

We backed away. Even the Titans backed away. We had to, to give the driver room to stand.

The Titans, I noticed, had dipped their massive, horned heads in respect.

"Which one of you's brought it?" said the driver, with something like anticipation.

The dame took one step forward and handed it over. When she stepped back, I slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her close.

"Don't worry," I whispered in her ear. "It'll all work out."

Raising something like an arm, the driver put on the hat.

We sat in my office: me, the dame and the two remaining Titans. "I'd offer you coffee," I said, "only the machine's busted."

Hyperion, the bigger of the two, waved away the offer with one gargantuan hand.

"Who'd have thought it?" he rumbled in a voice like boulders in a tumble-dryer.

"Ah well," drawled Oceanus. "We lost a bet. So what?"

"We lost Iapetos, is what we did. We shouldn't have bet him."

"He was nosy. You never liked him."

"Yah."

Then Hyperion turned to me and said, "We got you to thank for showing us that place, buddy."

"Interesting place," Oceanus put in.

"Sure enough. Strange fellow though, that driver. Who'd have thought he'd turn into something with so many teeth?"

"Yah. Poor Iapetos."

"Who'd have thought it?" I agreed. "So you didn't mind my, er, client making the substitution? Not putting the hat on herself?"

"Nah," said Oceanus, picking a piece of driftwood from between his teeth. "It can get pretty dull, you know, being a Titan. Everything's smaller than you are. Even most worlds."

"Especially most worlds," put in Hyperion.

"Yah. And it isn't every day we get to see a place we've never seen before."

"Especially one that's bigger than we are."

"And that driver."

"One weird character."

"Yah. And just a little ... would you say ...?"

"Scary?" I put in.

"Yah. Scary. We don't get scared much."

They sat silent for a minute or two, considering fear with eyes like turning worlds.

"So," I said, 'my client's debt?'

"All paid," said Hyperion, swiping that mighty hand again. "No bother. You guys, you did something today nobody's done for a long time."

"An eon," put in Oceanus.

"An eon," Hyperion agreed.

The dame pressed some of my favorite parts of her body close to me. I relaxed back in the chair and said, "What did we do?"

"You surprised us."

"IT'S A LONG TIME since I surprised a god," I said when the Titans had left.

"They aren't gods," said the dame.

"Next best thing," I replied. I pointed to the footprints on the car pet. "The size they are, they might as well be."

"You know, that's always puzzled me. They must be, what, a thousand miles high? But they always manage to fit in an ordinary room. How do they do that?"

"Search me," I said. "I still don't know how we got them inside that filing cabinet. I never folded a Titan before."

We both stared at the cabinet.

"Is the world inside that top drawer bigger than this one?" she asked.

"Bigger than all of them put together," I said. "At least, that's what the guy on the market said when he sold it me. I've only been inside it three times now but, from what I've seen so far, I think he may be right."

"It impressed the hell out of the Titans."

"That was the idea."

"What about the one who, um, stayed behind? What do you think will happen to him?"

"Iapetos? Search me. I'm just glad I got him down there in the first place. I promised the driver I would, you see. That was the ticket price we agreed on, you see, when I was down there hunting were-wolves. That was the fare, one Titan."

"What does the Search Engine driver want with a Titan? Especially one in so many pieces?"

"Who knows? Maybe they burn well."

Slithering off my lap, she danced across the office. The Titans had been good enough to clear away both the corpse of the poor Alsatian and the mess it left behind, so she had room to pirouette. She'd taken off the sweater and hung it over the stove to dry, which improved the view no end.

"You knew all along, didn't you?" she said, reaching a breathless halt. "All that time you were just keeping me talking and watching me dig myself deeper and deeper."

Enjoying the sight of her chest rising and falling, I nodded.

"I didn't work it out all at once," I said. "The information I gathered at *Lycanthropia Terminus* just confirmed the hunch I got when I worked out what that pooch had really said while it was dying on the carpet."

"And what was that?"

"When the poor critter turned into a man, it absorbed up just enough human vocabulary to ask for help, of course, being a German Shepherd, it came out as *Hilfe*. After that, I thought it said *knock*."

"'Knock'?"

"Yeah. Only I think what it was really trying to say *Knochen*."

"What does that mean?"

"Brush up your German, sweetheart. It means *bone*. The poor mutt was just looking for his lunch."

"You're so clever, my own little poor mutt. Have you got a bone?"

"Why don't you come over here and find out for yourself?"

She came over and, funny, all that German went right out of my head. Like I said: *femme*, yes; *fatale*, most definitely. Ooh la la.

"Is the world inside the top drawer bigger than this one?" she asked.

Sometimes you have to import bugs into your garden to protect it from other bugs, and sometimes you have to cope with one scary thing in order to cope with another.

the ecology *of* fairie

By
DAVID D LEVINE

Illustration by
ANDREA WICKLUND

THE STAINED ALUMINUM SCREEN DOOR WAS COLD IN DORA Huntleigh's hand as she waited in the cool summer night. She stood still for a long time, listening She heard the hum of the light over the door, the soft rush of traffic on 82nd Avenue, the distant barking of a dog. But no frogs

Dora worried about her frogs. She enjoyed their soothing, rhythmic *bredeep-bredeep-bredeep*—it reminded her of the peaceful suburban nights at the old apartment. When she listened to the frogs she forgot the peeling paint, the noisy neighbors, the Burgerville grease that clogged her pores. Sometimes she could even forget about Mom, wasting away in a bright, sterile room on Pill Hill.

It used to be that the frogs' chirping chorus would pause for only a few moments as she walked across the parking lot past the drainage ditch where they lived. It was as though there were some invisible line at the third parking place, where the woman from 3A always parked her rusty green pickup, and once Dora had crossed that line it was safe for the frogs to resume their song.

But two weeks ago, Dora had noticed that the frogs didn't start up again until she was well past the blue Toyota next to the pickup. Last week they had remained silent almost until she reached her own front door. And tonight ...

Just then a single voice called out *bredeep*, then repeated itself Soon it was joined by another, and another. But they wove a thin fabric of sound, a patchy thing that felt as though the lightest movement would tear it in half.

They're frightened of something, Dora thought, then rolled her eyes at herself. She pulled the screen door open, the harsh rasp of its hinges startling the frogs into silence again, and rattled her key into the lock.

The phone machine's red light blinked at her from the little table beside the door. Her chest tightened at the sight—any phone call could be bad news—but it was only Jenifer, from her old school. "Hey Dora, it's Jen. Haven't heard from you in a while. Give me a call, OK?"

Dora paused with her finger on the button. Jen had been her best friend, and it would be nice to see her again. But it would take an hour and a half on the bus, and then, inevitably, she would have to face The Question: "How's your mom?"

"Message, has been, erased," said the machine's crisp Japanese-accented voice.

Dora took a shower and scrubbed her face hard, trying to remove every tiny particle of Burgerville from her pores. Then she wrapped herself in her favorite fuzzy bathrobe and opened the freezer, where a Marie Callender's Apple Cobbler waited among the Healthy Choice frozen dinners. "Thanks, Dad," she said aloud, then pulled the cobbler from its box and popped it in the microwave, ignoring the Healthy Choices.

While the cobbler heated, she sorted the mail that lay piled just inside the front door. That was one of her jobs. Bills went in the folder on the kitchen table. Junk mail went straight into the recycling bin. Letters, or anything that might be important, went on Dad's chair where he'd see it when he got home from his four-to-midnight shift at the phone company.

Here was a fat envelope from the hospital. Dora flexed it; was it something important, like test results, or just another bill? She finally put it on the chair unopened—she had already learned more than she wanted to know about alkylating agents, and glucocortacoids, and all the other painful and expensive things they were doing to Mom in the hospital.

Here was a fat envelope from the hospital. Dora flexed it; was it something important, like test results, or just another bill? She finally put it on the chair unopened ...

The microwave's single clear note, so unlike the calming rhythm of the frogs, jerked Dora from her thoughts. She ate the whole cobbler, washing it down with Diet Pepsi and an ancient re-run of *The Cosby Show*. She would rather have watched *The Sopranos*, but that was on HBO and they didn't have cable here.

Leukemia was a bitch.

Soon the cobbler and *The Cosby Show* were both finished. It was ten o'clock and she was supposed to go straight to bed, but she turned around on the couch and stared out the window instead.

She saw her own reflection—a sixteen-year-old girl with freckles, straggly dark brown hair that refused to behave, and a nose that was too long and had a stupid little bulb at the tip—and the reflection of the TV, and blackness. Dora listened hard, but if her frogs were singing they couldn't be heard over the TV.

She got up and turned off the TV and the lights, then returned to her post, resting her chin on the back of the couch. It smelled dusty. With the lights off she could see the parking lot—cracked asphalt covered with yellow lines and rusty, outdated cars—and the line of reeds and cattails marking the edge of the drainage ditch. Beyond that, silence and darkness.

No—not quite darkness.

A light was moving among the cattails. A very faint, greenish-blue light. Could it be a firefly? She had never seen one before, she didn't think there were any in Oregon—or not anymore. She had read that they were dying out because of insecticides and global warming. Like the frogs.

Anyway, the light didn't *move* like an insect. It traveled in a straight line, three or four feet at a time, then stopped dead for a moment before moving off in a different direction. Up, left, right, left, down. And it didn't blink on and off—it flickered, like the light of a TV seen from very far away.

Sitting backward in the dark, watching that strange, faint, quivering greenish light moving outside the window, Dora suddenly got a chill that started at the back of her neck and ran all the way down to her tailbone. There was something about that light, about its pale luminescence and deliberate motion, that made her feel very small and defenseless. She felt *watched*.

Dora closed her eyes and shook her head. She was just spooking herself.

But she drew all the curtains and made sure the door was locked before she went to bed. Then she pulled the covers up over her head like she used to do when she was little.

Just before falling asleep she realized she had forgotten to brush her teeth. But even the knowledge that Dad would be disappointed in her wasn't enough to get her out from under the covers.

Dora hated the paper

mask she had to wear when she visited Mom. The little metal strip over her nose always pinched somewhere no matter how she adjusted it, and the mask filled up with her breath and smelled like tears, even when she wasn't crying.

Mom didn't look too good today. Her eyes were rimmed with red and black, and they didn't seem to quite focus on Dora when she came in. A few remaining wisps of hair poked out from under her Cubs cap. Why did she want to identify with a team that always lost—especially now? "Hey, sport," she said. "How's my Theodora?" She reached out a hand.

"I'm OK, I guess," she said. "I'm worried about the frogs."

"C'mere, you. Don't be such a stranger."

Dora took a step toward the bed, but stayed out of reach. Mom looked so fragile, with all the tubes and wires attached to her, and between the disease and the treatment she had almost no immune system. Early in her illness she had caught a cold that Dora brought home from school, and it had nearly killed her. "They're getting so quiet. Mom. It's like they're afraid of something."

"It could just be the weather changing," Dad said, his voice muffled by the mask. "They don't sing when it's too warm."

"Already?" said Mom, and sat up a little. "Where did the spring go?" Dad and Dora shared a quick glance over their masks. Mom had been in the hospital since February. It seemed like a year ago. A lifetime. "I wish I ... uh ... oh God." Mom groped for the kidney-shaped plastic dish on the table by the bed, barely getting it into her lap in time to throw up into it. Dora smelled the vomit, even through her mask, even through the smell of tears.

She left the room and sat on the hard plastic chair in the hall out side, knees drawn up under her chin and arms wrapped tight around her legs. She couldn't stand to see Mom throwing up. Through the door she heard the retching, and Dad's voice murmuring reassurances. Dora shivered, though it wasn't particularly cold in the hall.

"You OK? Can I get you something?" It was Nina, one of the nurses. She was Vietnamese and even shorter than Dora, who was small for her age. "How about some cranberry juice?"

"Uh ... sure."

The nurse came back with a clear plastic cup. "Here."

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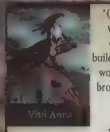

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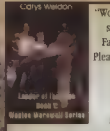

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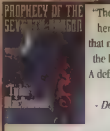

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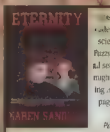

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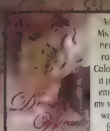

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"Thanks."

Nina stroked Dora's shoulder while she sipped the juice. "Your mother's a fighter, Dora. She'll come through. She's motivated."

"You really think so?"

"She wants to see you grow up."

"Is that enough to make a difference?" The last word came out half choked with tears, and Dora was ashamed. She needed to be strong.

"It really is. But she needs to know you're there for her."

Dora finished the juice and handed the empty cup back to Nina. "Thanks. For everything."

But she didn't go back into the room.

Eventually Dad came out and said, "She's sleeping now. Let's go home."

In the afternoon Dora visited the drainage ditch with her ecology notebook. So far she had seen water bugs, minnows, dragonfly nymphs, snails, and, of course, tadpoles and frogs. She had tested the water for some common pollutants, but she still hadn't figured out what was making the frogs so quiet and nervous. She'd done research at the library and had learned that amphibians were dying out all over the world, but nobody knew why for sure, and that wouldn't explain what had changed just in the last few weeks.

She pushed through the reeds at the edge of the parking lot and squidged down into the marshy area by the water. It smelled warm and moist and earthy here—a little icky, but natural and real, not like the sterile artificial smell of the hospital.

There was something strange at the edge of the water—a slippery translucent thing, like a used condom but much smaller. She poked at it with a stick, spread it out so she could see what it was.

It was the skin of a frog, about two inches long. Complete with eyes, toes, and mouth. The frog's stripes and spots were barely visible on the thin translucent surface.

Dora knew that frogs shed their skin, though she'd never seen one do it. But she also knew that they usually ate the skin after shedding it. And this skin didn't seem to have an opening where the frog had taken it off. It was more like something had removed the frog and left the skin behind.

Dora got a nervous feeling and turned quickly around. But there was nothing behind her.

After work that night, Dora went back to the ditch. She brought her flashlight, but she didn't turn it on—instead she waited at the edge of the parking lot until her eyes adjusted to the dark. Whatever was happening to her frogs, and whatever was the source of that strange, greenish glow, it was a thing of the darkness, and if she blundered around with a flashlight she'd never see it.

Moving slowly, as silently as she could, she crept through the rustling reeds and squatted down at the water's edge. The frogs shut up as soon as she came near, but after a long time they started in peeping again.

A three-quarter moon illuminated the scene with a cold fluorescent light. Dora's knees started to hurt and the wet ground chilled her feet and her butt. But she remained still. Waiting. Watching.

A *plip* sound in the water to her left gave her a start, but it was just a frog jumping. She settled down and waited for her heart to stop pounding.

Then the frogs shut up again, though she hadn't moved, and she thought she saw something off to her right. Slowly she turned her head. There was a pale, flickering, greenish glow right at the water's edge, maybe three feet away. And at the center of it was something that made her heart contract into a hard, cold lump.

It was a tiny human figure, maybe five inches high. Its arms and legs were long and thin, and it had translucent wings like a dragonfly's. It crouched at the edge of the water, slowly raising one arm—getting ready to pounce on a frog, which floated stupidly just a few inches away from it.

Dora flicked on her flashlight to get a better look at the thing. She wished she hadn't.

Whatever it was, though, it was shaped like a human being. It had nothing else in common with Dora. Instead of skin or fur it was covered with something hard, glistening, and iridescent—black with purple-green highlights. Its limbs were skeletally thin, with harsh mechanical joints like an insect's, its hands were as disturbingly inhuman as a mouse's clawed feet. The raised hand held a three-inch spear, thin as a needle, with a wicked-looking barb on the end. On its head it wore a leaf, twisted into a cone.

But what really made the breath catch in Dora's throat was its face—huge black eyes and a wide mouth bristling with curved, ragged teeth like fingernail trimmings.

The creature opened its mouth and screeched—a thin sound like two pieces of broken glass scraping together—then it flew into the air. The water riffled in the wind from its wings, which made a rattling hum like a big beetle. Dora kept the flashlight beam on it. It screeched again and flung the spear at her with vicious force.

Dora raised her left hand to ward off the tiny spear. It plunged into her palm with a terrible sharp sting and stuck out the other side. Dora cried out in pain, but she didn't take the light off the thing.

And there in the light of the moon and the flashlight, in plain sight, it vanished like a candle flame guttering out. One moment it was there, then it flickered and faded and then it wasn't.

Dora darted the flashlight around, trying to tell herself that it had just moved out of the beam. But it wasn't anywhere. It had disappeared. She had seen it go.

She realized she was holding her breath. She let it out with a shuddering rush.

All was silent.

Dora's mouth was dry and she fought to control her breathing. In the warmth and light of her own bathroom it was possible to imagine that she had not just seen a tiny human figure fly and vanish. This spear thrust through her bleeding hand was just a thorn, she had stuck herself by accident, and she would break off the barb and pull it out and put a Band-Aid on it and then it would all be better.

But when she snapped the spear in half it melted away like a tiny flake of ice. She whimpered as she felt it evaporate from her injured hand.

Trembling, she washed her hands thoroughly with soap and water, put antibiotic ointment on the wound—it smelled like the hospital—and stuck a Band-Aid on each side of her hand.

Then she turned on every light in the house, and the TV, and the radio. She closed all the curtains and huddled, shivering, in her bed.

She shrieked when she felt a touch, but it was only Dad. Somehow she had fallen asleep. The clock said 12:53.

"Hey, tiger. What's with the lights?"

Dora opened her mouth, then closed it again. Swallowed. "I—I had a bad dream. A really bad dream."

Dad sat on the edge of the bed. "Must have been. You OK now?"

She wanted to hug him. "Yeah. Now that you're back."

"I'm back." He looked like he wanted to hug her too. "Want to talk about it?"

"Huh?"

"The dream. Was it about Mom?"

"Uh … no. No. It was … it was bad." A twinge ran through her. "Hey, what happened to your hand?"

"I, uh, stuck myself making dinner. Don't worry, I cleaned it off and I put on antibiotics."

The person with nothing to lose is the most dangerous of all.

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My goblet stopped short of my lips.

"Relax," Valek said. "It's a standard toast."

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"That's Daddy's girl." He yawned broadly. "'Scuse me. Sleepytime for Daddy." She hated it when he talked like that, like she was just a little kid, but at the same time it was kind of comforting. "You gonna be OK?"

"I'll be OK."

But she didn't get back to sleep until after three.

"May I help you?" The librarian had a salt-and-pepper beard and a button that said PERFORM A SUBVERSIVE ACT. READ.

"Um, I'm looking for some information on .... um, fairies?" Suddenly she felt extremely stupid, but she pressed on. "I mean, you know, little people with wings. Only not Disney."

"Fairy tales?"

"No. Nonfiction."

"Hm." The librarian tapped at his computer. "Let's see what we can do for you ..."

Dora left the library with a stack of eighteen books about folk tales, mythology, and Victorian England. There was much more to this whole fairy thing than she'd ever dreamed. She wasn't the first to see one. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of Sherlock Holmes, had even photographed them!

But once she got on the bus and began to read, she started to doubt herself again. Arthur Conan Doyle had been duped. The books on folk tales and myths were all about psychology or literature—none of them seemed to consider the idea that fairies might actually, literally, exist. The Victorian fairies were cute, frilly. Disney things, not at all like the frightening being she had met. And the one book of "Faery Magick" that seemed to take fairies seriously was full of meaningless woo-woo about "earth spirits" and "focused energy."

She thought about taking a different tack—going back to the library tomorrow, researching insects and other small creatures. She knew that love-starved sailors had once thought that manatees—those huge cow-eyed sea mammals—were mermaids. Maybe what she had seen was really nothing more than a big bug. But the thought of asking the bearded librarian for more help was daunting, and she couldn't really convince herself that any bug could have done what the creature—the fairy—had done.

The one thing she read that resonated with the experience she'd had was that the term *fairy*, or *fair folk*, was a euphemism—like when Mom called the president "our glorious leader." It was a way of talking about them without revealing just how much you hated and feared them.

The really scary thing about that statement was what it implied: that you never knew when they might be listening. They could be anywhere. Even on a noisy, smelly bus full of chattering adolescents. And like some invisible carcinogen, they might bide their time for years before deciding to strike.

Unconsciously, Dora clutched her backpack hard to her chest.

Dora took the hand, but she knew that any contact or pressure aggravated the pain of the cancer that scraped at the insides of her mother's bones and veins and arteries.

For the rest of that day Dora tried to forget all about the fairy, or whatever it was. She sorted the mail; she washed dishes; she even vacuumed, for the first time in months, and found the missing half of her favorite pair of green socks under the couch. But when the sun went down she made sure the door was locked and kept the lights on and the curtains shut tight.

She went to bed at ten. But at 10:57 she was still awake. Finally she could bear it no more. She kneeled on her pillow and peeked through the curtains over her headboard, peering across the parking lot.

At first she saw nothing unusual, but then as she sighed and started to let the curtain fall she thought she saw movement. Clutching the curtain, its rough weave harsh against her cheek, she blinked hard, then looked again.

Faint, bluish greenish lights. Not just one. Dozens.

They were moving toward her.

"Oh shit," she whispered, and pushed the curtains closed.

She clutched herself into a little ball with her back against the headboard of her bed as the sounds started. Faint but undeniable, tiny scratching, scrabbling sounds that she felt as much as heard came through the wall behind her back.

It's mice, she told herself over and over. *Mice mice mice.*

But she knew it wasn't mice. She knew it was malevolent little inhuman claw-hands, and faces with huge black emotionless eyes and mouths full of teeth.

Finally she had to *do* something. She jumped from her bed, turned on the bedside lamp and the radio and the overhead light and the desk lamp. Twisted the desk lamp to shine its seventy-five watts out the window. Flung open the curtains.

There was nothing there. Nothing but the reflection of a terrified sixteen-year old girl.

But in the morning she found hundreds of tiny scratches on the aluminum window frame. Right next to the latch.

"You look *terrible*, sweetie."

Mom didn't look too good herself, but Dora didn't mention that. "I've been having trouble sleeping. Bad dreams." She had sprayed bug repellent all around the window, and that seemed to slow them down some, but they still came every night.

"I'm sorry." Mom reached out a hand. The hospital bracelet was loose on her thin wrist, and IV tubes were held in place with hospital tape that pulled at her pale skin. "C'mere, honey. Let me give you a hug."

Dora took the hand, but she knew that any contact or pressure hurt terribly, aggravated the pain of the cancer that scraped at the insides of her mother's bones and veins and arteries. She didn't squeeze the hand, didn't move any closer. "I'll be OK, Mom. Don't worry about me. You need your strength."

"I do worry about you, you know. I can't help it. It's part of my job." Mom tugged at Dora's hand, urging her closer, but Dora stood her ground. She didn't want to give her any pain, didn't want to risk infecting her again with some simple little virus that could kill her. A glance passed between them—a brief complex moment of defiance and concern from Dora, of release and resignation from her mother—and the tugging stopped.

"I'll be OK," Dora repeated, though she wasn't at all certain of that.

Mom gripped her hand tightly. "If there's anything I can do, you just ask."

Dora was sorting the mail again. Junk mail. Bill. Letter from Aunt Jacque. Junk mail. Bill. Junk mail. What's this?

It was junk mail, no doubt, with a bulk rate stamp and addressed TO OUR FRIENDS AT Dora's address, but the colorful envelope caught her eye. It bore a cartoon of a grinning ladybug and the words DEVOURS UP TO 60 APHIDS A MINUTE! ONLY $24.95 PER PINT! FREE DELIVERY!

Dora smiled at the cartoon, and at the thought of buying bugs by

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DEALER INQUIRIES WELCOME!

the pint She briefly imagined ordering a pint of them, setting them free in her drainage ditch The cheery red-and-black insects would swirl around her like the little plastic flakes in a snow globe, beneficial predators to eat aphids and other harmful pests

Not that aphids were her problem

But .

She set down the rest of the mail and sat cross-legged on the floor, staring at the envelope in her hand

What if . ?

She attacked the library books again, with a new agenda Reading between the lines Searching for the deeper truths beneath the myths, the legends, the Disney versions Looking for the manatees behind the mermaids

There were many kinds of fey creatures, she learned, with different names in different cultures Fairies Pixies Goblins Leprechauns Each had its habits and habitats, its preferences and weaknesses

Its predators and prey

The information was sketchy, contradictory, unreliable But there were certain themes that cropped up over and over Goblins were malicious. Pixies were self-centered and fickle Faines could be helpful or hurtful, and appeared at times of transition birth, puberty, marriage

And death

No!

But there was another type of fae, called a hob—a guardian earth spirit, protector of the home, drawn to generous and caring people, and fond of a saucer of milk

If she just put out a saucer of milk, the only thing she would attract was the neighbors' cat There had to be something more directed, more concrete

Most of the spells in the book of Faery Magick were inapplicable or vague, or unreasonable—where was she supposed to get garnets or a dram of dragon's blood? But here and there she found a paragraph or a sentence that made sense, a rhyme that resonated with something inside her, a list of ingredients that she could obtain From these she cobbled together a ritual that felt right.

She couldn't be sure It wasn't much to go on But she had to do *something*

Dora stood barefoot at the edge of the drainage ditch, wearing only a clean cotton nightshirt and carrying a shoebox. The cold mud squidged between her toes, and the light of the full moon rippled on the water.

This is the stupidest thing I have ever done, she thought

She set down the shoebox on a rock, and from it she drew three shot glasses. She'd found them way at the back of a cabinet and she hoped they wouldn't be missed. Squatting down, she placed them in an equilateral triangle at the water's edge, pressing each one into the mud so it wouldn't tip over Then she brought a Tupperware container from the box, containing a few cups of milk with several tablespoons of honey mixed in As she poured an equal quantity into each shot glass, she hoped that two percent milk would be good enough Finally she poured a line of salt around the three glasses, forming a triangle, careful that it be continuous and connected

She folded the little metal spout back into the canister of salt and put it back in the box She stood, facing the moon, and drew in a breath. Then she let it out again

This is ridiculous, she thought. *I can't do this*

But she took another breath, licked her lips, and read from a square yellow Post-It.

"Guardian spirit,

Gentle one,

To my aid

I bid thee come

Share your wisdom

And your power,

Seek the evil

And devour.

By the Moon's

Magick light,

Come to me

This long sweet night."

Her voice quavered a little, especially on the part about the Moon's Magick light, and she hoped fervently that none of her neighbors could hear or see her, but she got all the way through without stumbling over any words

She waited

Nothing happened

Finally she blew out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. *Well, that was stupid,* she thought. *I should get inside before I catch my death of cold* She bent and picked up the box.

She was about to gather up the shot glasses as well The book said they should be left out overnight, but at this point it just felt like compounding her own foolishness At the last moment, though, she decided to leave them. What harm could it do?

And then, as she was walking away, the asphalt rough under her dirty, bare feet the frogs began to sing. It was a thin chorus, to be sure, but still stronger than she'd heard in a week or more

Dora washed her feet, put away the Tupperware container and the salt, and crawled into bed

She fell quickly asleep and slept undisturbed all night

One of the boxes at Mom's bedside was beeping when Dora and Dad arrived, a high harsh tone, and Nina was fiddling with her IV tubes. Finally she did something that made the box shut up. "Thank you," Mom mouthed, but no sound came out. Nina smiled and touched Mom lightly on the shoulder as she left the room.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi." She had to try a couple of times, and even then it was little more than a croak. "Sorry I had a rough night." Dad took her hand.

Dora sat on the edge of the bed, wondering what to say Finally she asked, "Is there anything I can do?"

"Just be here with me."

The three of them sat together, watching clouds scud by over the city outside the window and talking about nothing in particular, until suddenly Mom lurched upright, reaching past Dora for the dish on her bedside table

I coped with fairies, I can cope with this

Dora grabbed the dish and gave it to her mother, then held her shaking shoulders while she vomited Dora was shaking too, but she thought over and over: *Guardian spirit, gentle one, to my aid, I bid thee come* It helped, a little.

Eventually, the episode passed Dad took the dish away, and Dora brushed the wispy hair from her mother's cold and sweaty face. Her eyes stung with tears, but she sniffed them back

"Thank you," Mom said after a while. "Thank you for being here."

"It's part of my job."

After that there were good days and bad days, surgeries and therapies, a new school year to prepare for, dishes that still had to be washed .. somehow, life went on But the frogs sang grew stronger and stronger And once, just once, as she was setting down a paper cup of milk at the edge of the water on a moonlit night, Dora saw something It was toadlike, a brown and hairy thing the size of a football, with large black eyes and a broad mouth It smiled at Dora and slipped silently into the water

She remembered what she had read about hobs, and so she did not thank it ❧

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JON FOSTER: BODY LANGUAGE

BY KAREN HABER

JON FO[illegible]TANDING OUT IS ON TO MAKE IT FEEL[illegible]NE need to get back into painting. I'm feeling so far removed from the process—where I'm not experimenting any more, where I'm not pushing. Although the computer, in the beginning, let me experiment and push with color more, and I think it can let you do anything you want, visually, but for me, the computer feels like I'm out bouncing around in this one little area I've just hit where I'm mastering this certain look, and I want to go back to painting.

"That's become more important again. It's always been important but I've gotten lazy."

This comes from an artist who in the past decade has established a new look for *Star Wars* comics, received accolades for his cover work on DC's *Hunter* comic series, including a gold award from *Spectrum 10*, and other *Spectrum* awards for editorial and institutional work, and is a favorite of fans in many media.

Foster's admission is also surprising in view of his early studies with Alpha Digerato Rick Berry, the first of any artist to employ digital magic.

However, take another look, and perhaps Foster's brushwork isn't so surprising. Maestro Berry is, after all, a multi-media master who often sings of hand skills. He is one acquainted with oil on the brush. Perhaps Foster has merely learned his lessons well.

"Rick taught me to look beyond," he says. "He was the one who made it seem okay, and also showed me how he did it himself. It was affirming—to see someone you admire do that, and teach you, it gave me more confidence. In the realm of oil painting, watching him, I learned to let the brush do the work. I was just making smudges. I learned that the brush is really a very subtle, complicated tool. You can make something in one brushstroke that defines the form with one mark. You need to think about it. There's a technique, a form, a precision—even loading the brush with paint from the palette—you should be thinking about it. You should be aware of it."

"Each stroke must count. It's like a martial art."

The marks of Foster's brush can be seen in his book *Progres-sions: The Art of Jon Foster* (Cartouche Books), wherein robots, owls, and oddly contorted figures dance with barely contained creative energy.

ABOVE: A personal project entitled *Crowbot*.
OPPOSITE PAGE: A book cover for TOR Books entitled *The Skyborn*.

Foster's approach to the figure—especially the figure in motion—is distinctive and owes much to a close study of the art of dance.

"Dance came through Rick. He's always been very aware of it, and he got me interested in it. That action, those poses—my main driving interest—is body language."

"I basically just said to myself, let's try and draw something that hasn't been drawn and get into a quirkier pose. And in searching and sketching and looking at dance, I could translate some of that into the work. Certain words—edgy, contorted, angst—were in my mind. I didn't want to have the elegance predominate."

"An illustration should create a sense of wonder and a question—or several. I want the viewer not to fully understand what is going on but present enough to them to make them want to find out."

In works like *Mothership*, *Magebound*, and *Wizard Wars*, the viewer can be intrigued by and appreciate Foster's audacious command of the figure in riotous, inelegant motion.

"As I've said, my main driving influence is often the figure. Body language—the language in itself I find so unique, so compelling and powerful."

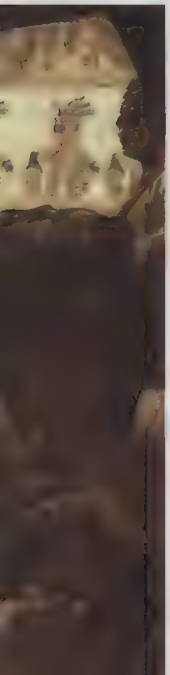
Even with his groundbreaking *Star Wars* comic book covers, Foster has established a reputation for edgy, fearless composition and determined depiction of muscular, dynamic women. In *Blue (Star Wars #33)* we see the lion-hearted Jedi warrior Aayla Secura, light saber in hand, leading the charge into battle.

"The real credit for taking that character and making something interesting and new out of her goes to Jan Duursema," Foster said. "She talked with the writer and came up with that concept."

Foster's women are definitely not babes. In fact, sometimes, they're not even women, not at first, anyway. That was the case in *Star Wars #28*, the cover for which depicts the deadly character Aura Sing. The ferocious leaping female figure began life as a male based on Foster's good friend and fellow artist Lars Grant-West. The image morphed to the female when Foster called upon his wife, artist, and muse Melissa Ferreira, to take Lars' place as model. The progression of that particular image can be seen on the Web at. *www.starwars.com/eu/feature/20010830*.

BELOW, LEFT

RIGHT



LEFT: A book cover from the *Wasted Land* series, entitled *The Unmarried*

Says Foster: "I've combined Lars and Melissa in that image. The pictures of the work in process show how I melded them. You see Lars, then you see Lars with breasts, which is pretty startling, and then I used my wife to put a little bit of femininity in there. But I wanted the figure to be powerful, to have a real physicality. I was a little worried how the actress Michonne Vourriague, who played the character in the film, might react, but I heard she loved it."

Beginning with a rough thumbnail sketch, he then turns to live models—and photos of them—for reference. "There can be some oddness, something quirky about the stance or anatomy that I don't always remember. The photos help me to select and match certain elements."

From here he moves on to painting in oils on canvas or large board. Foster mainly relies on the computer to scan the work, pump up colors where necessary, and experiment with changes to the composition. But he takes the work back out of the box to complete it in oils.

"The computer allows me to try endless variations on a theme, which, oddly, can help me in my approach to oil painting. It encourages me to change the work in the paint. That's more difficult and time consuming of course, but that's the way I like to do them."

"I think there's something more exciting about each brushstroke. Each one has energy. You get lost in it; you're on a roll. When you're able to like the process, ride the process, you're able to forgive yourself, wipe out something if you don't like it and begin again."

Speaking of the magic of Foster's brushstrokes, in his introduction to *Progressions*, Christopher P. Reilly writes of the artist: "There is always a textured sense of character in his paintings that transcends the stroke of the brush and digs deep beneath the painted surface. I look at the Twi'lek girl, Aayla Secura, immortalized on the covers of issues 33 to 35 of the

ongoing DHC *Star Wars* comic-book title, as a perfect example. Before Jon put brush to canvas, all we knew of this race was that they had gruesomely ugly "tentacled" heads, and were screeching victims or backup singers in weird, Muppet bands. Without Mr. Foster's stunning renditions of this Twi'lek Jedi warrior, we would still have the image of these tragic fodder beings, and nothing more. But suddenly, we have Aayla Secura who moves with a fluid, mythical grace that would have given Gustav Klimt cause to take notice, a presence that exudes beauty as much as it does danger. Jon not only gave a silly, throwaway, bordering-on-the-pathetic character presence, he somehow managed to empower her.

"I think, above all, that's where Jon's strength lies as an artist. He gets deep inside what he's painting and gives it a purposeful sense of being. The work speaks in a language that both the eye and the intellect can savor. Proof of this would be the addition of Aayla Secura to an upcoming (*Star Wars*) film—with Jon's covers as the inspiration and reason for her inclusion."

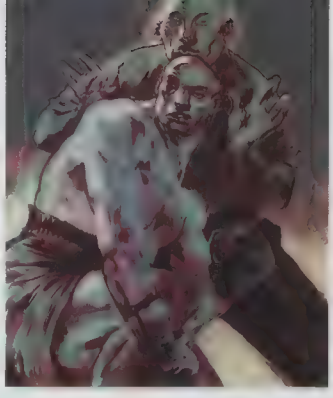
To which Foster replies, with characteristic modesty, "Working on the covers for this *Star Wars* series was a joy. The interior art by Jan Duursema filled the pages with excitement, intrigue, and excellent storytelling. Her pencils were sent to me for reference, and as soon as I saw them, myriad possibilities for paintings formed in my imagination. She really inspired me, and my take on Aayla Secura is the result of that inspiration."

The need to draw developed early for Foster, spurred, perhaps by his peripatetic childhood as the son of a military pilot. Moving around from school to school, Foster soon learned to look inside himself. "Staying home and drawing sure beat going to the playground where strange kids would torment me." He graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1989 and first made an impact working for TSR and its successor, Wizards of the Coast. His work during this time included art for *Alternity*, *Science Fiction Age*, and *Realms of Fantasy*. After that he began to work with *Star Wars* material for Dark Horse Comics.

Although Foster has painted such iconic characters as Darth Maul and Darth Vader, his true love is for machinery—especially robots.

"I love robots that have personality. I love the machine elements, but they're not machines to me, they're personalities. I like the way a robot can stand in for a human. That's the thing. It's another symbol or metaphor with which to come at different personalities and characters sideways. It's a way to comment on being human and on relationships, to take them out of the everyday. That's the wonderful thing about science fiction. It takes things out of the every day historical context, and allows you put it in a new frame. The element of cool baits you, and then you discover something deeper, grander, more profound."

Of course, Foster's robots have their own unique body language. And they allow the artist to focus on the childlike joy inherent in simple interactions. In *Catbot*, a robot twiddles a piece of string at a ghostly cat of which only the ears and tail are visible. Is it there at all? Does it matter? The 'bot is so absorbed in its play that it has knocked a picture on the wallpapered wall askew.



"If I had time to paint just robots, that's all my work would be—robots! They're iconic, like the idea of chair or house. They are us in disguise, super-powered, cold and warm, young and old, symbols for us to ponder what makes us human."

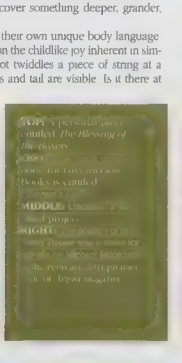
"Lately I've been doing some work for myself featuring robots. I'm thinking about doing some writing. Right now it's all scribbled notes and drawings."

"For me, if I'm not swimming and moving forward, I'm sinking. It's a big driving force, to try and find something new, something that's more distinctly me. I still don't feel that my work is distinctly me."

I've picked up cues from Phil Hale, and as I said, Rick Berry was a big influence. I still feel that I'm very beholden to my influences. Some of them are so overwhelming. You have to work through them in a certain way without stealing from another artist. Artists are made up of a huge melting pot of cultural references. It's what you add to it that makes it yours. I'm still developing."

"I have a rather selfish goal, and that is to make myself happy or proud of what I have just painted. After that comes the need to make the viewer happy or interested. But most important for me is to be able to look at a piece and tell myself that I did something I thought was good."

Jon Foster's Web site address is: *www.jonfoster.com*



LEFT:
Artistic Impression of Toy Planes Crossing the Barrens.

JON FOSTER

THE RAIN GOD

All he wants is your undying devotion and the occasional offering. Is that too much to ask?

By Way Jeng

Illustration by Joe Kovach

THE FIRST TIME I MET THE RAIN GOD I DIDN'T think much of him. It was about six o'clock in the morning, and I was driving to the office. I stopped at the market on the corner for coffee. It's not very good, but it's hot and cheap. I was expecting a slow day at work, so I decided to treat myself. Altogether I bought a cup of coffee, a porn magazine, a lottery ticket, and a newspaper. I was out the door and walking to my car when he yelled at me.

"Hey, you took my paper!"

I stopped and turned around. The street was empty, so he had to be talking to me. He was about five-feet-ten and around 140 pounds. Dark hair, and so pale I wondered if he knew what the sun was. I might have been scared that he was pissed off, but he was as thin as a stick and I didn't think he was looking for a fight. I don't know what I thought of him. I probably thought he was nuts.

"Excuse me?" I asked him.

"The paper. You took the last one. You took my paper."

"Your paper? Find another one."

He held out his hand as if he expected me to give it to him. "It was supposed to be my paper," he said when I failed to offer it to him. "Give it to me."

"It's mine," I shot back.

"First come, first serve."

"Come on, man. Let me see it for a sec. I need it." There was something about the way he said it, like he was pleading with me, that made me think something was up. I would have given it to him, but I was too embarrassed to admit that there were naked women between the classifieds and the travel news.

I was about to make a polite excuse and be on my way when he lunged at me, grabbed the paper, and tried to run off with it. We started playing tug-of-war with the paper, and everything went downhill from there. I dropped my coffee early on, and before I knew what was going on I was pulling on the paper with both hands. It started to rip, and I fell over backward with part of the front page in my hands. When I got up he was crouched on the floor, reading the paper like it was his rich uncle's will. At first he looked excited, then all the sudden he

looked sick. One second he was a kid reading a card on a Christmas present, and the next it looked like somebody punched him in the stomach. He sat down on the curb and kept reading the same page over and over again.

I walked over to him, but I didn't know what to do. What do you say to somebody who tried to steal your newspaper then read something so bad it almost sent him into a coma? I stood there and watched him.

"I thought," he mumbled, then he stopped. "I thought it was going to rain. It's a very nice day for rain," he finished a second later, and looked up at the sky as if he'd lost something in a cloud and he wished it would rain and give it back. Then he shrugged and gave me back what was left of the paper. "Hey, I'm sorry about all this. I'll make it up to you."

I watched while he got up and started walking away like nothing had happened. I knew I should do or say something, but it was so weird all I could do was sit there and hope I'd wake up. When he was walking around the corner and almost out of sight I realized I didn't know his name. Just then he stopped and yelled at me. "Martin!" I don't know why he did, because he swears to me he's not telepathic. Sometimes I wonder. It's the sort of thing he would lie about.

IT WAS A COUPLE WEEKS BEFORE I SAW Martin again. I thought I'd never see him again, but it turned out he lives in my building. I never knew I lived in the same building as a deity, but it's true. If the landlord knew he probably would have raised the rent. Once that almost happened when he thought one of the girls who lived a floor above me was a famous model, but it turned out she was just really hot. Anyhow, when I saw him I didn't remember him. I was in the elevator, going down to the parking lot, when the doors opened and Martin walked in.

"Hey, you again!" he said to me when he got in.

"Excuse me?" I asked. I try to be polite to people I don't know. I probably shouldn't, but it makes my mom happy. "Have we met?"

"Yeah, yeah. You were the guy I took the paper from that one time. It was outside the store. You had a porn and almost spilled coffee on me."

"Oh." Now I knew I was sharing the elevator with a psycho. A six-by-four deathtrap made for two.

"Right, you remember? Well, I'm sorry about that. I don't know what got into me. Temporary insanity, you know?"

"No problem." Be nice to the crazy man, I figured. Humor him, and more importantly don't act like you want to run for your life as fast as your legs can carry you.

"I'm having a party tonight. Do you want to come? It'll be fun."

"Sorry, I've already got plans," I demurred.

"Come on, have a drink or two. It's the least I can do. Party starts at seven if you want to come." Then the elevator doors opened and he hurried out.

I don't know why I went, but I did. Maybe because I was bored. Maybe I was being polite. For all I know he was using some kind of mind control power that he swears he doesn't have. But I went to the party. Most of the people who showed up were also from the building. Some old folks from the fifth floor. The twins down the hall from me. The girl I see in the laundry room with the big boobs. The funny guy on the second floor who's always wearing suits. I don't know how Martin knew them all.

The party wasn't one of Martin's best. Some people were watching a movie, others were talking, and a few were eating. I spent half the night trying to talk to the laundry room girl. After she made it abundantly clear to me that she was out of my league I sat down on the couch in the living room. A bunch of guys were talking about stupid things they did in college, so I wowed them with a few old drinking stories.

Martin overheard me and came over. "That's not true. Nobody can drink that much." I don't think he was listening to any of my stories. He was probably looking for trouble.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Well," I said, "I could drink you under the table."

Martin pulled out a bottle of tequila, and the next thing I knew somebody got a stack of shot glasses from the kitchen. We both did three shots really fast, then it got iffy. Martin would take one, then I would. It ended up with me winning, six shots and still standing. He passed out cold on the floor, and the rest of the guys and I dragged him to bed. Later

Could have been anything. Could have been a drop of water on a tree falling down, or I could have imagined it. For all I know it was somebody spitting on me, but it wasn't.

on he said he let me win, but you don't crack your head on a coffee table after you let somebody win.

AFTER THE PARTY MARTIN AND I GOT TO BE friends. We'd do normal stuff. Watch movies and TV, that sort of thing. We went to the bars on Saturday nights, and it was on one of those nights that he finally told me he's a rain god. We were walking out of one of the local meat markets, and we were both a little more than wasted. Right before we left I got shot down by this great-looking Russian girl, and I have to admit I was disappointed that she wouldn't give me her number.

"You know what the problem with women is?" Martin asked me.

I thought about it and wished the sidewalk would stop slipping out from under my feet. "Nah. What's the problem?"

"Respect!" he shouted into the night. "People, they got no respect. Like that girl back there."

"What girl?"

"You know, the girl." Martin gesticulated vaguely in the direction of the bar. "No respect. It wasn't always like that."

"No?"

"I'm telling you, man, there used to be a time when women fell over themselves trying to get a god into bed."

I was drunk, but not drunk enough to let that go. "What are you talking about, Martin?"

"I," he said, stumbling down the sidewalk, "I … am … a god."

I laughed at him. "Whatever, man."

"No, no. I really am." He stopped walking and shook his head. "Honest, man. I am totally a god."

"Oh yeah? What kind of god?"

"Rain god." Martin tried to strike a dramatic pose with his hands on his hips and looking to his side like a superhero, but he almost fell on his face instead. I'd say it hurt his credibility, but to do that he would have needed some credibility to start with.

"Rain god? You're a rain god?" I don't know why I bothered listening to him. Sometimes being drunk will do that to you. If Martin had told me he had a pink elephant in his apartment I would have heard him out. "Prove it. Make it rain, Mr. Rain God."

"Ok," he said uncertainly, "I will." Martin stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and stared at the sky. Nothing happened, then he raised his hands in the air. More nothing, but it didn't look like he was goofing around. He was shaking all over like he was lifting something heavy over his head. I was about to tell him to quit being stupid when a drop of water hit my forehead. Then he went down in a heap on the sidewalk.

It was a random thing. A drop of water. Could have been anything. Could have been a drop of water on a tree falling down, or I could have imagined it. For all I know it was somebody spitting on me, but it wasn't. Martin made it rain. I don't know how, and it wasn't much, but he did it. The day after I asked him how he did it, but he said I wouldn't understand. He's probably right.

MARTIN WOULD GIVE THE STRANGEST GIFTS. "You'll never guess what I got you!" he said to me on my twenty-sixth birthday. Martin thought birthdays were funny. I think because gods don't get born the way we do. I don't know how old he is, but once he told me his first followers were a Germanic tribe. I never get him something for his birthday, which suits me fine.

"If I'll never guess, why don't you tell me?"

"Because that's not fun. Now guess for me, mortal!"

"Fine, fine. Calling card?"

"Cancer!"

"Cancer? You got me cancer?" I was shocked. Horrified. All those things people in 19th-century literature are when they find out the hero sympathizes with the lower class.

"Well, it was more like I returned it for you because I knew you wouldn't want it. Sorry, couldn't get store credit."

"What?" Sometimes Martin thinks things make sense when they don't. Probably comes from speaking tongues as your native language. He tried to teach me once, but all I remember is how to ask where the bathroom is.

"You had cancer, and I got rid of it. Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking it's not getting you something, it's taking something away. Surprise! I got you a snow globe, too." He took a tissue-wrapped snow globe out of his coat pocket. It had a little log cabin inside it.

The first thing I did was sit down. "I had cancer?"

"Sure. Liver cancer. What you might call a malignant tumor."

"How'd you get rid of it?"

"Please, I'm a god. You think I can't get stuff done?"

"Martin, you're a min god. Not a get-cancer-out-of-me god." I didn't mention that he's a washed-up god, but I thought it in my head.

"Yeah, but I know a guy. He owes me a couple, so I cashed in."

"He owes you favors?" I was feeling dizzy. Martin took the snow globe from my hands and started shaking it. A week later he stole it from me.

"Sure. I'd zap stuff with lightning for him. Burn bushes. Little stuff. These snow globes are neat, aren't they? They had lots of 'em at the store."

"Was it going to kill me?"

Martin stopped shaking the ball, thought about it, and shrugged. "Maybe. Why?"

"I want to know if I'm going to die!"

Martin shrugged. "It's a pain to keep track of every single thing. You all die on me sooner or later."

MARTIN DIDN'T USE HIS POWERS MUCH. I never asked why. At first it never came up, and after that it seemed rude. I found out why at the poker game.

Every Thursday was poker night. We'd play five-card draw for nickels and dimes. Sometimes people I'd never met before would come, but we had a few regulars: Darren from the fourth floor, Scott from across the hall and a door down, Roman, Arcadian, a bald guy named Pete, the twins, and Nick. On any given night, between four and seven people would show. That night it was me, Martin, some new guy, and Nick.

We played around some and the new guy got washed out pretty quick. We usually call it a night if there's only three people left, but Martin and Nick said they wanted to keep playing for old times' sake. I didn't have anywhere to be, so I stuck around. Martin dealt a few more hands and won them all. I think he was dealing seconds. Martin wasn't above that kind of thing if it was between friends and there wasn't a lot of money at stake. Sometimes I wonder what he would have done if he'd known what was going to happen.

The ante was a quarter. I had nothing but junk.

"Well?" Martin asked me. I shook my head.

"Raise one dollar," Nick said. A dollar was our maximum raise.

"All right," Martin said, alternately fanning out his cards and smoothing them back together. "I'll see the buck and raise another."

They kept raising each other until there was over fifty dollars in the pot. I don't know why it went that far, except that maybe it was some weird territorial thing. I guess Martin got sick of it, because he finally called a stop to it. "Cut it out, Nick. I call. You better not be bluffing." Martin tossed a few quarters on the table and leaned back in his chair.

Nick smiled and put the cards on the table. Three jacks. "The streak's run out, and you're all wet," he laughed. He reached over to grab the money, but Martin waved him off.

"Sorry, man, but I'm just getting started. Full house, fours over nines." Martin lay the cards on the table and, sure enough, he had a full house, clear as day. He kept talking, but it was mindless taunting. "Who's the big man now, huh? Who's the big man now?"

"You little ..." Nick rumbled. I was about to break it up when he lost his temper and slammed his fist on the table. He looked at Martin like he was trying to shoot death beams at him through his eyes. I guess he must have been trying to do something exactly like that, because a second later the cards on the table started to smoke, then one of them caught on fire. Martin neglected to tell me that Nick was a fire god. I guess it's one of those things that you forget to mention when you're making introductions. I thought he was an insurance agent.

He looked at Martin like he was trying to shoot death beams through his eyes.

. . . a second later the cards on the table began to smoke . . .

Martin laughed like he was having a grand time I watched the both of them, wondering if I should say something, then Nick collapsed I don't remember what happened after that. None of it felt real, like I was dreaming it instead of living it. One second Nick's face hit the table, and the next Martin was splashing a pot of water on the table to put out the fire. I picked up the phone to call for an ambulance, but Martin said it'd be faster to take him ourselves

When we got to the hospital Martin told them Nick passed out, but didn't say why. The doctors took him away, and I never saw him again. Later on I heard he had had a stroke Martin got drunk and told me it's what you get for flexing muscles you don't have anymore After he sobered up he refused to talk about it ever again

MARTIN WOKE ME UP EARLY ONE SUNDAY morning around six with a very annoying phone call.

"Are you up? Are you up? You gotta be up You're up, right?" he babbled. Martin might be centuries old, but sometimes he acts like he's six years old

"It's early, Martin," I complained. "What do you want? This better be good."

"You gotta come down here, man. Come on, what are you waiting for?"

"Martin, where are you? What's going on?"

"I'm downstairs, outside. Would you hurry up? Are you getting dressed yet? You're not, are you?"

"Sure I am," I lied. I was in bed, eyes closed, phone in hand, and half asleep Martin might be fun most of the time, but nobody's fun at six in the morning

"Dammit, would you get down here?"

I hung up the phone.

Two seconds later the phone rang again, and I picked it up and put it back on the cradle The phone rang again about as fast as it takes to dial my number "I got a lot of change down here!" he managed to scream before I hung up again The phone rang the whole time I was getting dressed

When I stumbled out the door to the building the first thing I noticed was that it was raining, which was odd because I didn't notice it was raining from my apartment I threw my hands over my head just in time to protect myself from the water that failed to land on me Sure enough it was raining, but it wasn't raining on me. Rather, it was raining in front of me The rain stopped halfway across the sidewalk in front of the building, and you could see a clear line of wetness showing where it started and stopped Martin was standing in front of the rain, sticking his hand into it He did that for a second, then walked halfway into the rain, half dry and half rained-on.

"Isn't it great?" he asked me.

"Sure Martin."

I stood next to him for a minute. It was cool, but I didn't know why he bothered getting me out of bed to see it

"Did you know I used to do this to people?"

"Do what?"

"Do ... That!" Martin waved his hands at the rain "I followed people around with the rain. I made the rain stop a foot or two from where they were standing. They'd try to walk or run out of it, but I'd make it chase 'em down. It was great," he chuckled Then Martin turned white and looked at me "You don't think somebody would do that to me, do you?"

"I don't know, Martin But who could do it? Some other rain god?"

"You think?" Martin stuck his hand back in the rain "Do you think there are any left? Real rain gods, I mean Not has-beens like me Do you think somebody else might have made it?"

"I don't know."

"I bet somebody could have. Could have gone and found himself a little tribe somewhere," Martin mumbled as he stared off into the rain. "Maybe some little farming tribe in the middle of nowhere that never heard of meteorology. Somebody still needs him They used to need me, too, before they had the evening news."

Martin stood there, watching the rain fall on his hand. I waited for a while to see if he was going to be ok, but after ten minutes I got bored and went back to bed. When I woke up an hour later the rain had stopped and Martin was passed out on the sidewalk with a bottle of whiskey in hand. I dragged him upstairs and threw him on my couch.

ONE CHRISTMAS I DECIDED TO GET MARTIN a fruit basket I guess it's safe to say that Martin took it the wrong way "I got it! I got it!" he screamed as he pounded his fist on my apartment's front door. "Open up!"

I opened the door to find Martin holding the fruit basket in both hands and grinning like a devil gone mad He was flushed red, and it was the first time in my life his skin wasn't pasty white all over "This," he started, then stopped to catch his breath. He was sweating, and I think he sprinted all the way from his apartment to mine "This is great." He sat down on my couch and stared at the basket like it was the Holy Grail.

"All right, Martin. I'm glad you like it." I shut the door and sat down on one of my chairs. "So what's up?"

"We have to start planning. There's so much to do. I'm a little rusty, you know, but that's no big deal. What's important is I am finally back on the road to glory, and it's all because of you. Pack your bags. We have to get moving!" I could tell Martin was going to start rambling on if I didn't stop him, so I raised my hand and he stopped long enough for me to get a word in.

"Hold on. What are you talking about? Where are we going?"

"We have to get going. Move to the country or something. Do you think we could start here, in the middle of a city?"

"Martin, you're not making any sense! Why would we go anywhere in the first place, and what's wrong with being in the city?"

Martin looked at me funny, and I think for the first time he realized I didn't know what he was talking about. "It's going to be tough to start getting converts around here. We should go somewhere small, maybe start one of those colonies in Montana."

"I'm still lost. Converts? What converts? Who are we converting? And to what?"

Martin looked at me funny again. "Not to what, to who. To me."

"To you?" I was so shocked I didn't even laugh, but I wanted to. I'm glad I didn't, because it would have hurt Martin's feelings, but I really did want to. He might have been a nice guy, but I couldn't imagine myself worshipping Martin. I'm not a religious person to begin with. I'd say I'm an atheist, but that's not really true. The gods are real, and I know it for a fact. But I don't want to worship any of them. I don't know what that makes me. "Don't be ridiculous. Who would worship you?" I didn't mean it to come out like that. Maybe Allison was right about me being insensitive.

"Then what the hell is this about?" Martin shook the fruit basket at me.

"It's a fruit basket."

"It's an offering!"

"It's a what?"

"An offering. You know, an offering. Don't you people know anything anymore? The gods get angry, so you give us stuff to make us happy. Sound familiar?" He threw the basket on the coffee table and sulked in his seat.

"It's fruit, Martin."

"Yes, fruit. Fruit you gave me in a ritual. It's an offering. Sure, it's the bottom of the barrel. I would have preferred a slaughtered pig or lamb or something, but it's a start. Don't you get it? If I could get a few more of these," he gestured at the fruit on the table, "I could be somebody again. I feel better than I have in ages." Martin clenched his hands and stared at them. I swear he was in awe of himself. "If a few more people believe in me, pray, and give me more offerings I'll have enough energy to do something again."

I never realized giving somebody fruit for Christmas could have such powerful implications. "I'm sorry, but I wasn't trying to convert, Martin. I mean, don't get me wrong. You're a nice guy, but I don't want to start getting all weird and religious here."

"Why not? Think about it," he said, starting up his best salesman act. "You could be the High Priest. You'd be the greatest of all my people. That'd be something, huh? Once I get some of my powers back we can have it all. What do you want, money? We could get money. Once we get a good following we can start a tithe. We'll farm and sell what we make. There's some good money to be made if you 'happen' to know if it's going to rain, right? And if the rest of the state has a drought, well what can you do, right? I can do that, you know. I can do all kinds of weather stuff once I'm back to my old self."

"I don't know about all this, Martin. I—"

"Hear me out," he interrupted me. "You'd never have to go to work. No more paper-pushing. No more deadlines, no more traffic. I'm your boss, and I'm a nice guy. All you have to do is lead everybody in a couple prayers every day. It's five minutes of work every couple hours. No big deal."

"Yeah, but still. I've got my life here."

"What's so great about this that you can't leave it? You don't have kids or a house. You're not even married. But you know," he said slyly, "you could be."

I took one of the apples out of the fruit basket and hit Martin on the side of the head as hard as I could with it. He went out like a light.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"We could get you a wife, no problem. Come on, man. You know me, I'm not going to run some monastery. You want to make orgies part of weekly service? I am all about that. If you're High Priest you can get laid whenever you want."

I didn't know what to say. Part of me was scared, another part was intrigued by the prospect of being somebody women would sleep with to get some thing, and most of me was still trying to comprehend what was happening.

"Or how about power?" Martin continued. "We could have some real fun once I got my powers back. I can do more than rain. I can do all kinds of weather. I could make it hot, or cold, or snow, or anything! If I got enough power, I could try that hurricane again…," he mumbled, staring off into space. Martin never mentioned anything about hurricanes to me, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know. "Come on, it'd be fun. We could rain out ball games, or make nudie pictures with the clouds."

"I don't think so, Martin. That's crazy. It'd never work."

"How do you know? We haven't even tried."

"It doesn't matter. I'm sorry, but I don't want to get mixed up in some cult thing. Going drinking or seeing a movie is one thing, but I don't want to start a religion. It's not right."

"It's not a cult thing," Martin yelled at me. "I'm not some crazy who thinks he's a god, I really am one! You know that, I know that. If we get somebody else to believe it we'll be in business. I can't do this alone, don't you get that? I need one of you."

"I'm sorry, but I don't want to do it. I don't want to be a priest, or whatever. I can't pray to you. It'd be weird, you know?"

"What's so weird about it?"

"It just is. It's not personal. If you want to do this so badly, why don't you go yourself? You don't need me. You can do it if you believe in yourself."

Martin stood up, walked over to me, and picked me up by the neck with both hands. He held me about two feet in the air, half choking me. I had no idea he was strong enough to pull that kind of stunt, and I don't think he was normally. "Believe in myself?" he laughed. "I'm the only one who still does! This isn't pop psychology. I'm talking about, it's my life! I don't have to believe in myself, because I already do. I know I can do anything. Anything," he repeated, taking a deep breath. I looked in his eyes, and there wasn't any rationality in them. I don't think he realized I was having trouble breathing. Or maybe he didn't care. "I can do anything, do you understand me? But I can't do it by myself. One of you has to believe I can do it," he said, almost pleading with me. "Why can't you believe in me?"

By this time there were spots in my vision, and I was getting dizzy. I clawed at Martin's hands on my neck, but he wasn't paying any attention to me. "Look at this," he said, picking up the fruit basket off the table and holding it near my head. "This is what I'm talking about." He shook the basket for emphasis. "Was it so much trouble? You can do this kind of thing. This is easy for you! All I'm asking for is my life back. I want to be somebody again. Is that so much to ask of you miserable people?"

All I wanted was to breathe again. I took one of the apples out of the fruit basket and hit Martin on the side of the head as hard as I could with it. He went out like a light. After I caught my breath I watched him for a while in case he got up, then I dumped him on my couch.

What else was I supposed to do with him?

MARTIN AND I DIDN'T TALK FOR TWO months. When we finally did we both pretended that it never happened. Things were never the same between us. I guess if you refuse to worship somebody it changes things forever, maybe like things are never really the same with your ex. We don't do as much stuff as we used to, and when we do there's a weird tension that won't go away. Martin sometimes talks about moving away to Montana, but he never does. For a while I felt bad about the whole thing, but there are some things you can't ask a friend to do. I buy him a fruit basket every year for Christmas. I guess it's the least I can do.

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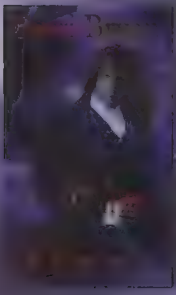

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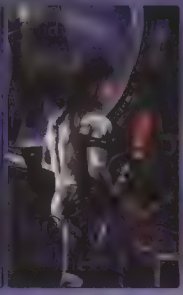

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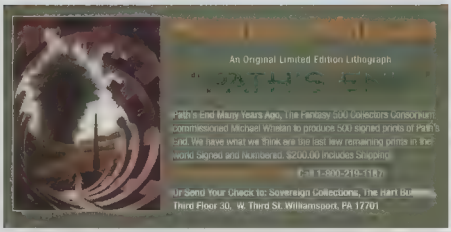
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robots

Continued from page 38

completely internal world, which was possible, for her, in more than one sense. When she turned back to me, I couldn't read her expression. Then, suddenly, she pulled my face close to hers and kissed me in a way that reversed the Earth's rotation. It was like falling, and the sensation was beautiful and strange and impossible, and no matter what else happens to me or to the world around me, I will never forget that feeling. It was as close to enlightenment as I have ever gotten. I am almost certain it is as close as I ever will get. I kept my eyes closed, holding on to the sensation.

"I have nothing to teach you," she said, gently, but with finality. "And I won't be studied."

When I opened my eyes, she was gone. I caught a glimpse of motion in my peripheral vision, something small hopping into the gutter, but what it was, I never knew.

I stood alone in the street.

All around me hundreds of hearts fell, crashing and shattering, to the ground.

On a late afternoon, I sat at an outdoor café in Santa Monica, sipping a caramel machiatto and dwelling on the thoughts that tangled in the back of my mind, trying to tease out the essential from the mess of the peripheral. I remembered a world transformed, occupied by robots and frogs and a beautiful, strange girl or goddess whose name I never learned. Lately my dreams were like a memory from earliest childhood, flashes of an alien world more than half-hidden, something longed-for that dances outside the reach of one's grasp, a golden butterfly, beautiful and coveted, but perhaps best left uncaptured.

Yes, things happened the way I remembered them. But, yes, they also had happened differently. The world contained robots that shouldn't function. It contained hearts that fall from the sky, and frogs with wings, and buildings bedecked with living circuitry. And yet it was also true that the world contained none of those things.

Out on the boulevard, mermen poled an opalescent whale through traffic, their scaled muscles catching the gold of the sinking sun. Pygmy dolphins rode the whale's wake, occasionally leaping into the air and singing snatches of a Doors tune ("Love Her Madly," I think). It was a perfect Los Angeles postcard moment, but on this day its charms were wasted on me. Somewhere somehow, I had touched a world much more interesting than the pretty but prosaic scene visible from my sidewalk bistro chair. I wondered if I'd ever find it again.

Draining the last of my drink, I stood and set out to wave down a passenger squid. It was time to start looking and learning again.

That was my job. ❧

queen's hotel

Continued from page 44

showed it to! He promised I'd be the first one he'd ever let play it outside of him. And he only got to play it one day. One day! Look, those are my brother's initials, there's the maker's mark, you son-of-a-bitch, where'd you—"

The fiddler and the mando player pulled her off me, but the guy who'd ordered the beers had had a few already, and he swung in on the waitress's side, and then the bartender landed on all of us. The audience never got the second set.

But what the hell, they got their money's worth, anyway, what with the Ontario Provincial Police putting on quite a show of their own.

Of course, I was the only one they booked. Wasted my money on the room in the Queen's Hotel, but got one free in the lock-up. They impounded the guitar on the strength of the waitress's statement.

That was a new one, I thought as I sat on the cot in the cell. Guess it can still surprise me. I'd encountered his girlfriend at least three times, but the sister, that was new.

Like I said, it's different every time.

The first time, of course, I didn't know what the hell was going on. What was the name of that guy's band? The Royalists? It was a jug band. Not very good.

Turning up at the Queen's Hotel that night had not been my idea at all. Scared shitless. What if someone recognized that damn guitar? How would I pay for the room? I'd looked into the little box in the neck of the case out of bravado. There was just enough for the room and a meal.

And he'd only picked the guitar up from the shop yesterday, after all.

The Loyalists, that was it. Some of them even wore cheesy red tunics. At least they didn't force me into one, when they forced me into the guitarist's slot. But the tomatoes didn't show up as badly when they hit those tunics, not like my white shirt.

They really weren't very good, that band, but I was worse. It was angry. Angry? Mad as hell.

I stretched out on the cot.

I didn't worry about the charges against me. The guitar would take care of that. After all, it was meant to be played.

I closed my eyes, shutting out the gray cinder-block wall and the small, barred window high up in it. I could hear another inmate stirring restlessly in the next cell, the rustle of someone's newspaper, traffic outside the window.

So damn predictable, I'd thought as I'd lifted the neck of the guitar, there in the back seat of that off-pink Studebaker Lark. It was the logical, if not the brightest, place to put it. There was the corner of a bill, sticking out of that little box built into the case, to support the neck of the guitar and hold spare picks and strings. I slipped out the wad, ran my thumb over the strings once more, reverently, for effect, closed and fastened the case casual-like. I was just maneuvering the bills into my pocket when he must have seen something in the rear-view mirror.

"Hey!" he said, like the guy with the beers, "That's mine!" I slipped an arm around his neck.

"Slow down," I said, and got ready to jump. But instead of slowing down his foot froze on the accelerator and we skidded top speed across the line, scattered the gravel of the shoulder, swerved and upended into the ditch, and the next thing I remember was the two guys who must have made the call that brought the sirens.

I was well into the bush by the time the cops scrambled down the bank.

I pushed my way quietly through the trees, and after what seemed hours, although the sun was still up, I'd found myself on a secondary road, putting out my thumb.

"Only going as far as the Queen's Hotel," the driver had said.

Traffic. The skittering of an empty plastic bottle, rolling with the wind.

I opened my eyes. Limestone outcropping, rising opposite, jack pines and birches. The eastern townships, maybe. Again.

I watched the empty mineral water bottle roll with the combined force of the spring breeze and the cars that ignored my outstretched thumb.

The bottle skittered across the highway, just missed by wheels, rolled with the direction of whatever car had caught it, then back with the breeze, almost coming to rest on the shoulder, but then another car would zoom past, sending it onto the pavement again.

Spring. Almost suppertime, and, as in the song about the girl in the roadside tavern, the scent of rain was in the air.

The bottle skittered across the road again. Like the first time, the wad of bills wasn't in my pocket. Unlike the first time, I didn't worry about it. I knew when I opened the case and that little box in the neck, the bills would be there, like always. Or maybe this time I'd get a credit card.

"The old crossroads is a-waitin.'" I hummed, watching the bottle roll helplessly back and forth across the center line of the highway.

"One leads down to destruction."

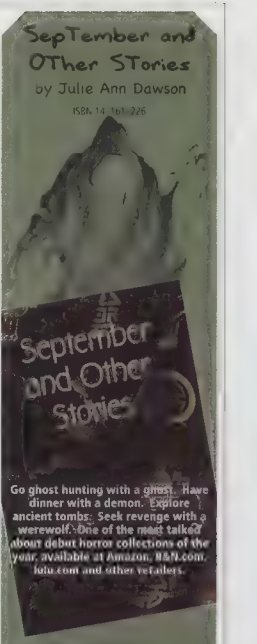
Someday, I thought, it will have to run out of Queen's Hotels.

The bottle came to rest on the gravel shoulder as an SUV pulled to a stop just ahead. I picked up the guitar and ran for it.

"I used to play a little," the driver said as I hoisted the case into the back seat. "Where to?"

And when it runs out, I thought, what then?

"Queen's Hotel," I said. ❧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By Eric Baker

Area 51 looks to draw fans of Bungie's *Halo* and other FPSs.

RIGHT Choose from a variety of weapons as you blast your way through Midway's Area 51. *BELOW* Arc the Lad: End of Darkness *is a Japanese RPG-turned-action title BOTTOM Genre crossing is abundant in* The Secret of Zir An Core

AREA 51 IS A REINVENTION of the old series of light gun based video arcade games. This version is an FPS available from Midway for the PC, Xbox, and PS2. The player takes the role of Ethan Cole, a member of a heavily armed government HAZMAT team called out to a military base in Roswell New Mexico when things suddenly go wrong. Plague, mutation, monsters, explosions, elite death commandos of a shadowy cabal, and, of course, aliens are all waiting for the player in the chambers and corridors of the underground base. In fact, before the game has progressed very far, Cole will contract the plague, which will lead to his mutation and ability to turn into a monster.

Anyone who has played an FPS on a game console in the last year will have no trouble excelling at *A51*. From controller layout to HUD to game mechanics, *A51* is straight from the mold of a dozen other games—including *Halo*. There are no distracting mini-games or odd mechanics to learn. Things move in a linear fashion from battle to cutscene in the expected and approved manner. There are a good variety of weapons with which to kill things, and Cole's monster form adds some variety when it is needed.

Owing to *A51*'s subject matter, the biggest coup of its creation is the appearance of David Duchovny as the voice of Cole. Powers Boothe and Marilyn Manson are also voice characters but it is Duchovny's monotone that narrates the game as well as providing Cole's dialog. The *X-Files* star comes across even more low key in this role than on his old TV show. Occasionally a welcome contrast to all the explosions and gunfire, Duchovny's delivery is, on other occasions, annoying because it disconnects the player from the drama of the plot line.

Overall, there is no killer flaw too worthy of turning players away from *A51*, however, there is no drop-dead cool stuff that requires urging players to run to the store for that matter either. Overall, *A51* is a good game, well suited to fans of shooting and of the sort of back-story it revolves around.

Another game that is part of a long-standing franchise whose designers have re-envisioned it this time around is ***Arc the Lad: End of Darkness*** for the PS2. *Arc* is a classic Japanese role-playing series, but this installment abandons the turn-based combat of games past for an action system that has more to do with a game like *Jade Empire* than it does something like

The legend is as old as time ...

The High King is dead. The land is in peril. A child has been born to save his people. But a traitor lurks with evil in his mind and murder in his heart, dogging the footsteps of those who protect the babe who would be king.

But magic is at work, high magic.

Gwydion the Dreamer awakes screaming, from a prophetic dream of tragedy and loss, a dream peopled by kings of the past. Though he thinks he is not ready, the Shining Ones lay a task upon him: protect young Arthur; and locate Caladfwlch, the lost sword of the last, murdered High King of Kymru.

Dodging assassins to find the woman who holds the key to unlock a horrible secret, and fighting the longings of his own shattered heart, Gwydion sets out upon his odyssey. And finds that fate cannot be fulfilled without sacrificing the life of someone he loves ...

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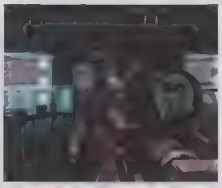
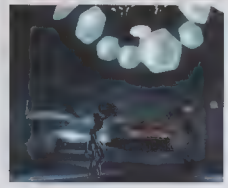




***ABOVE:* A51 *is straight from the mold of a dozen other FPS games. BELOW: Battle your way to hero status in* Arc the Lad: End of Darkness *for the PS2. RIGHT: Experience sword-slashing Samurai action in an unlikely setting with* Samurai Western.

Final Fantasy X. Each push of a button on the controller activates an attack while the joysticks run the character about the screen. The D-pad is used to launch special attacks, defenses, and heals.

The hero of this *Lad* installment is Edda, a humble fisher boy, whose adventures begin five years after those chronicled in 2003's *Arc the Lad: Twilight of the Spirits*. Edda grows to be a hero, and progress in the game also unlocks 23 other playable characters, many of which have appeared in previous games, including *Twilight's* hero, Kharg, and Arc himself. Each character has their own weapons and fighting style. Items and treasure are shared among all the characters, but some items help some characters more than others. Finding new characters encourages finding new loot, and vice versa.

The move of *EoD* to an action combat system was probably to accommodate the most surprising thing about the game: online play. If there is a way to implement cooperative turn-based combat in an online game, no one has tried it in a mass-market game yet. *EoD* has both cooperative and competitive on-line modes, and the characters that are leveled up in the single player game can then be used on-line.

Fans of the series will want to play, despite the new combat, just to see how things have gone for their favorite characters. People who don't enjoy Japanese RPGs because of their relatively slow combat should definitely try *EoD*, particularly for the chance to go on-line and play the game as part of a group.

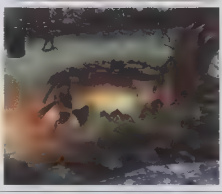
A different sort of Japanese action role-playing game is ***Fullmetal Alchemist 2: Curse of the Crimson Elixir*** which, despite it's name, is actually set before the events of *Fullmetal Alchemist and the Broken Angel*, released earlier this year. Based on Japanese anime, the heroes of the game are once again the magical but ill-fated Elric brothers, Edward and Alphonse. Edward is the one with the metal arm and leg; Alphonse is the one whose spunt is bound to a large suit of armor. The player controls Edward and the console controls Alphonse. The good news this time around is that the designers have upgraded the AI and Alphonse is much more useful in this installment than he was in *BA*.

The graphics in *CotCE* are the same cell shaded style of the first game, and (more to the point) of the animated series. The voice actors in the game are the same as the series, and there is a full 30 minutes of new animation broken up in the various cut scenes contained in the game. Fans of the series get more of what they like this time around and players new to the franchise get a representative example of it.

The plot of *CotCE* has to do with a mysterious cult, unexplained disappearances, and an extremely powerful alchemist. The Elric boys are pulled into events, which in their case means dispatching a succession of enemies with their innate abilities. On the rare occasions when this isn't enough, they can use their special powers to transform the various "normal" objects scattered around the levels into high powered weapons. When things get really dangerous, the player can bring the two brothers together to pull off enemy-leveling combo attacks.

A third and final video game new to the U.S. by way of Japan is Atlus's ***Samurai Western*** for the PS2. This is definitely an action game, and it contains no RPG elements or online capabilities. *SW* is all about swinging a katana and dodging bullets. The game proceeds more or less on rails. There are no dialog trees and no decision points. There are no keys to find or characteristics to level. Play moves from one large battle to the next, pausing only to unlock cutscenes and new swords for the main character. The game is all about creating an adrenaline rush and demanding focus, not about character building and resource management.

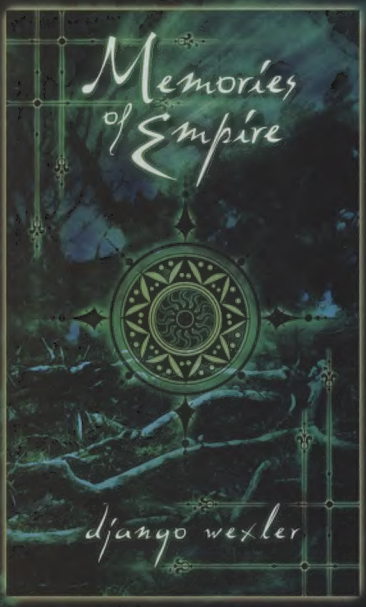
The main character in *SW* is Gojiro Kiryu, a Japanese Samurai who has come to the American Wild West in search of his brother. The brother has set aside swords and Busido to come to America and work as an enforcer for a wealthy villain named Goldberg. Gojiro's brother turns out to be one of many enforcers in Goldberg's minions, and, before the game is over, the player will have to guide Gojiro in killing all of them. This goal is accomplished by the mixing of two tactics. The first is the dodge button, which lets Gojiro spin out of the path of or cut from the air the hails of lead that Goldberg's men hurl at him. The second tactic is chaining slashes with his sword, which builds up "power" allowing the character to ultimately unleash devastating special attacks. In addition, the character can pick up loose objects to use as shields, and pick different swords and stances to emphasize different killing tactics.



There are 100 unlockable items in *SW*, including 70 accessories, 20 weapons, and 25 playable characters. Additional stages can be unlocked, and the two gamers can play the game cooperatively. Ultimately, how much U.S. players enjoy the game will come down less to its bonus features and more to how they feel about cowboys. The art makes the

Different lives, different paths.

Each seeking destiny.



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Veil thought her life had ended the day her father sold her to a passing slaver. When the slaver's caravan is butchered by a lone attacker, her only chance for survival is to forge an unlikely friendship with the mercenary, Corvus. Beset on all sides by pursuing demons, she wonders if death wouldn't have been easier.

Unbeknownst to Veil, Corvus, an apparently invincible swordsman, searches for the fragments of his past. Cutting a bloody swath across the Empire, now humbled by the Khaev invasion, he seeks only to know who he is.

On the other side of the continent, Kei and her partner reluctantly join a mission to hunt down a rogue sorcerer. The expedition is led by an eccentric noble with a penchant for getting everyone around her killed. Kei's misgivings only increase when she's introduced to their erstwhile ally, the shadow spirit Jyo-raku. However, she is duty bound to obey her commander.

Different lives; different paths. Each seeking destiny. Unaware they are merely the pawns of ancient spirits, players in a deadly game that will ultimately bring them together for the greatest prize of all ..

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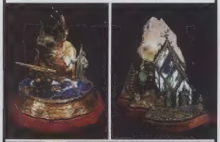

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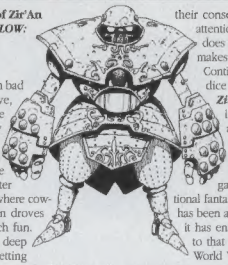

***RIGHT*: The Secret of Zir'An Core Gamebook. *BELOW*: Dungeon Master's Guide II.**

American and Mexican bad guys too ugly to love, and the actions of the bosses are certainly evil, but for players who like the Wild West mythos and the place of the gun fighter in it, playing a game where cowboys are butchered in droves isn't going to be much fun. Fans of action with no deep feelings about the setting will have a much better time with *Samurai Western*.

Away from the world of computer RPG's and back to the paper-and-dice games that spawned them, Wizards of the Coast has released the ***Dungeon Master's Guide II*** for the *Dungeons and Dragons* RPG. A hard cover book of 288 pages, the *DMGII* gives further help to the person most responsible for the success of any paper and dice RPG campaign. The book's emphasis is on the long-term management of a *D&D* campaign, as well as taking players beyond the dungeon and interacting with the world in which those dungeons lay. There is also an emphasis on things that GMs can use "right out of the box," an acknowledgement that while theory on how to create good settings and non-player characters is wonderful, many DMs don't have the time they need to actually put that theory into practice.

The large town of Saltmarsh, which has a history of appearing in various *D&D* supplements, is included as a mapped out and statted up example of what a community of that size could be like in a campaign. In addition, there are more magic items, and more ready-made monsters and NPC threats— including cultists and undead masters. There are also new rules for teamwork, benefits for player character parties, and PC organizations within the game world.

All of which is not to say that there isn't plenty of theory in the book. There is, in particular, a discussion of *D&D* vs. Medieval Europe. The point of this section is to help DMs bring the things they like from that historical, real-world background, to their game without overdoing it. Also featured is a section on artifacts, how to use them, and, of course, how to destroy them. So much of the source literature and the scenarios for *D&D* campaigns take their cue from the *Lord of the Rings* that items of power and their consequences need special attention. All in all, the book does what it sets out to do: it makes things easier for *DMs*.

Continuing in the paper and dice world, ***The Secret of Zir'An Core Gamebook*** is a brand-new game and game world from Paragon Games by way of White Wolf. The basic premise of the game is that of a traditional fantasy world whose history has been allowed to play out until it has entered an era analogous to that of the period between World Wars I and II. In short, *SoZ* is a fantasy game (right down to the dwarf and elf analogs) in a pulp/action setting. Picture orcs with swords and machine pistols attacking a zeppelin luxury liner only to encounter a square-jawed sorcerer and his team of specialists.

As the first book in the series, *SoZ* is an equal parts background, mechanics, and equipment/monster guide. A lot of work has gone into the background section; there are 22 "origins" (the character's starting race and nation combined) and the list of the world's languages is longer than that. Essentially, there are the evil states ruled by super powered dictators, "good" states (currently in alliance against the evil ones), and the periphery/non-aligned states. Some states focus more on magic, others more on technology. There is enough differentiation between every nation and race, and so many new names that readers will do a lot of page flipping while trying to digest the background. GMs trying to sell the game to their players will want to start in a knowable slice of the world and spread out from there.

The system of the game is a combination of proven mechanics. Players determine the order they act in by bidding their speed points, which are also used to "buy" actions when it is their turn. Thus, acting first may leave a character able to do less than someone who hazards the risks of waiting. Rolls are made against difficulties, and points beyond the required number are spent on special effects. This is a very player-friendly system in that it allows one to be truly creative in combat—GMs will want a good cheat sheet to track the effects their npcs might employ in return.

Overall, *SoZ* is good game that makes apparent the work that went into it. The only thing to be said against it is the bad typesetting decision to have the black rules text superimposed over silver glyphs of mood text. It is legible, but not as easy to read as it should be.

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